

looking for the magic. by Alias_B

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Aftermath of Torture, Brenner is his own warning, Canon-Typical Violence, Character Death, Chronic Illness, Diabetes, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, Explicit Sexual Content, F/M, Friends to Lovers, Gaslighting, Grumpy Jim "Chief" Hopper, Hawkins National Laboratory, Hospitalization, Human Experimentation, Hypoglycemia, Martin Brenner Being an Asshole, Mental Breakdown, Mental Instability, Murder, Mutual Pining, Needles, Non-Consensual Drug Use, Power Imbalance, Protective Jim "Chief" Hopper, Psychological Trauma, Recovery, Self-Harm, Sexual Abuse, Soft Jim "Chief" Hopper, Torture, Unhealthy Relationships, Will Tag Each Chp Explicitly To Be Safe

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Summary:

Nothing ever happens in Hawkins. Jim Hopper told himself that when he was drawn back to his hometown after losing everything. Lucy Garland would disagree. The monsters here are just cleverly disguised in fine suits.

1. Thread Count

Author's Note:

This is more of a teaser smut blurb intro to the fic, trying to feel out the characters. I have a lot of plans spinning about. I plan to finish WTL first but this was a fun smutty start. Fic will likely go further back into the past and weave around the present here Pre-S1. Thanks all! Let me know what you think. :) Explicit Sexual Content. Also Brenner gets his own warning.

Summer 1982

5:55am. The clock's glowing red numbers signaled an impending alarm. Six in the morning every single day. Even days off work like today. Perhaps it was overkill. Most things in Lucy's strict routine were.

She knew that. Never a need to point it out. The obsession with order and cleanliness to make her feel in control of this life. Everything was carefully placed and just so. Easier to stomach the lies and disease threatening to swallow her whole. She liked to think that she was just clinically unlucky. Clinically rotten. Women's conditions in this decade.

5:56am. Lucy shifted under crisp sheets. Five-hundred thread count and cocooned in warmth. The sun wasn't even threatening against the windows just yet. Too damn early. She turned her head to something that was certainly not part of her routine. A warm body with a beating heart behind her. Jim Hopper. Chief of Police. Clinically disorderly for a man with a shiny badge. Deep in slumber. Lucy was barely able to make out the exact features of him. The lines of his messy hair and broad shoulders and that growing scruff.

5:57am. No, this was not part of the routine at all. A man sleeping in her bed with his arm slung lazily over her waist. The smell of his cologne and wash on her perfect sheets. The way he might shift and grunt and give a soft snore. Which always earned a smile because it was completely endearing.

5:58am. Jim, fast asleep, must have sensed her struggle. Hitched a breath like he might wake before nuzzling his nose into the nape of her neck. As if she was something that brought him comfort. Something indispensable and important.

Lucy dreamed of being indispensable. Felt his breath tattoo the word in heat upon her shoulder blades.

This wasn't part of her routine either. The aftercare that lasted into the night. That steep sense of security which overwhelmed by simply feeling comfortable enough to dream in the same bed with someone else. The things we took for granted.

Fuck it.

5:59am. That alarm clicked off before it could blare the morning radio. Lucy burrowed into her pillows. Fluffed and perfect. Felt a naughty thrill rush.

Usually, she roused and stretched. Always made her bed to perfection complete with unnecessary decorative throw pillows. Jim made fun of them the night before and got one tossed playfully at his head.

Shower. Meds. Teeth brushed. Flossed. Mouthwash. First insulin shot. Hair. Makeup. Dressed. Never pants. Breakfast.

A cup of cereal measured out or two small pancakes with cut strawberries. Maybe scrambled eggs if she had bell peppers to throw in.

She always washed her pans after. Wiped down the counters. Floss again if need be. Mouthwash. Lipstick.

Lipstick was the cherry on top. Mauve or red. The signal her day was starting. Errands. Walks. Work. She was prettied for all of Hawkins to see. Though few approached. Years of this routine and for what?

A cold house with a lonely willow tree. A town that thought she was a witch or a shut in. Being a mortician certainly didn't help that. A reputation that made others sigh with pity. Poor girl lost so much.

She only has herself. We cannot save her.

Dispensable.

6:02am. Still in bed with Chief Jim Hopper and Lucy didn't feel it was the end of the world. The opposite. Nestled into his flesh for the free body heat. A finger traced up his knuckle causing his hand to twitch. Carefully, she eased further into him, tucking black hair behind her ear.

Jim stirred again. Snored once.

6:05am. She'd planted her bottom firmly against his shaft. Silken nightie against cotton boxers. One wiggle and Jim's arm tightened around her. Another and he'd sighed into her spine. Sweet dreams etched. Lips pressed and third time is always the charm. So she thought. Jim's hand felt around before gripping her hip.

"Morning." Lucy yawned for good measure. Stayed there. *Oh, dear me, he's hard.*

And big and hard and tender and god he feels so good. So right. Lucy could linger here wrapped up in his cologne. A naughty girl who stayed in past her alarm. God, did she need to get out more.

"Mmm." He grunted into her hair. A man of pure poetry. She felt his nose trail up, head lifting to see the clock around her. "Sleeping in, are you? I'm shocked." His voice slurred like he might be going back under.

"Not sleeping now." She bit her bottom lip. As if it were a dare, she squirmed a little against his body. Played coy about it. Stretching.

Who could have predicted this?

Felt good today. To be bad and throw caution to the wind. This routine that held her life together was too important. Not every reason was a good one. Lucy knew that deep down even if she never said it.

She'd made her life something easy to hid in. Away from warm bodies.

Had she made herself dispensable because the world let her believe it?

Jim's fingers pressed into silk. Into a hard edge of her hipbone. He inhaled the scent of ink black hair. A rich floral blended with a warm citrus. Spring rain warmed by the bloom of a hot summer afternoon. Lips fell to her shoulder. Facial hair scratching flesh pink. An obscene shade she'd admire in the mirror later. He shifted the strap of her nightie aside to kiss properly.

"Staying in bed, then?" Jim uttered. *With me.* It made her feel dirty. Lucy wasn't allowed to be dirty. But, she thought of Jim inside her body. Against hot flesh. Under painted nails. Seeping into bone marrow.

6:11am. He started to wake fully there in the dark. The hand on her hip slid against her stomach, melting Lucy into his frame. She just sighed, lips lifting because this was bliss.

"Yes." Came a purr. Head tilting back to expose her neck to his mouth. She smelt burnt sugar in the air, let it seep along her tongue. There was always something smoky and charred about lust. A smell like burning baked goods and sweets she couldn't even indulge in.

But, *this.*

She could eat it up. Lick the plate and her fingers clean then beg for seconds.

Jim's broad body and his arms tightening and his lips on her jaw. They could really swallow each other whole here in the dark. Hawkins would have no idea.

6:13am. Lucy wanted more. Shifted her bottom into his dick until he hissed over her shoulder. Fingers inched her little gown up. A thumb traced the curve of cotton underwear. Her hands covered his, led one down her thigh and the other up her jaw. Jim's fingers gave a sweet caress to her cheek, stuck between her and the pillows.

Digits teased up between slender legs before he drew her palm back to cup his shaft. Beading with arousal against thin fabric. A wordless

gesture. *Feel what you do to me. Take responsibility.* She was happy to. Lucy stroked him, slipped a hand under the boxers until Jim was kicking out of them.

Lucy thought of clothing strewn about her perfect carpets and didn't give a damn. Didn't jump up to fold them and tuck them neatly aside. Especially not when two fingers traced full lips and slipped along her tongue.

"Jim," she heaved softer. Licking the pads again. Muffled into the pillow, a smaller tone etched. "*Touch me...*"

"Hm?" He played with her and Lucy mewled, tight hands shifting forward to dig into sheets.

"Touch me." Hips jostled into him with more force. More need. More fire.

Burnt sugar. Sticky and scalding. Seeping.

Under the blankets, he succumbed and squeezed her bottom. Fingers shifting up between her thighs for a deeper rub. Lucy jolted into him, legs opening for more until the cotton was damp. Until he peeled the fabric down her legs to toss them. Jim brought her hips back into his. Erection pressed snug to her ass. Slipped between taut legs. Slick and filthy. Arousal pooled and mixed together. Leaked on the sheets she would be washing later.

The odd thought sent teeth into her bottom lip.

"Fuck." A heavy grunt when she sank digits down to guide his tip between her folds. Cum leaked between her fingers until she was licking him from her skin. Jim's broad hands palmed at her nightie, bunched it around her waist so he could cup her breasts. A hitch and a sigh followed. Thumbs rubbed at her nipples. Plucked them gently until she arched into him. Teeth sank into a shoulder, the swell of a tongue upon the marks left.

6:20am. Jim Hopper worshiped her. One hand on her breast and the other playing between her legs. Eliciting sighs and moans from needy, burning lungs. A bow cast across the strings of a tuned violin.

Deftly guiding his cock inside her all the way with one thrust. Adjusting, she took every inch of him. Jim held her like he *needed* her. Like she kept him grounded to this earth. Like he'd just die if their bodies came apart.

"Fuck me." She asked it so sweetly. All coyness lost to thin air. Vanished like her in a swell of pleasure. Fingers twisted into his, hard on her hip again. Sleepy bodies finding a lazy pace that picked up. Hurried for more and more. Each note they struck was filth. Pure and unadulterated. Until Jim was smacking into her. Breath heavy upon ears. Arms brought her tightly into him, those devilish fingers snaking down to play with her clit before she could whine about it again.

They rocked together. Moaning. Drowned.

"Lucy." He tried to downplay how worked up he was. Tried not to gasp that name but the syllables fizzled over her body. Fuck the routine. Fuck the cleanliness. Fuck this reputation.

Just fuck me.

Lucy twisted a little. Brought her leg up so he could hold it. Unfurled for him. She thought of petals falling and vines filling the walls. Crawling to cover and cloak them in. A slice of paradise with brightly colored flowers in bloom. Turned her head to steal a kiss. Pushed her tongue into his. A drunken sort of kiss. Jim's mouth was on her jaw and neck to keep his breath away. Lucy could care less as long as he kept thrusting. Just like that.

He filled her as his knuckles paled. Fucked her until she was dirtying her sheets with obscenities. Thought about how divine she'd look if she crawled atop him all sleepy and curved. That sly smile curling while she rode him because she needed him now. Needed him bad.

Lucy brought her hand over his to guide him more fervently between her folds. Slipping against the bud there that made her cry out. Jim was happy to oblige. Lips against her ear, he asked if she wanted to cum. Just for him. Yes. Coaxed her to the edge.

"I'm gonna fu..." A sharper breath pulled because his hand was rubbing more insistently. Teasing her release out like he wrote the book on it. Like he knew her to the bone marrow. Fingers tweaked her nipple in tune. The snap of his hips into her own ached her. For a moment, she couldn't take it. Never wanted it to end. Never wanted to know where her body stopped and his began.

Deep brown eyes shut tight. Thighs quaked and Jim wasn't letting up. This one was his.

"You gonna cum for me?" He teased again, stubble swatching all over her neck as she tried to nod. A loud whine came forth instead. Jim was lost in her too.

"Fucking c..." The word shuddered into a cry. A chant of them when orgasm pulled her muscles in and shoved back again. Jim felt her squeeze and bucked forward into the resistance of it. "Jim!" She gave the magic word. Locked up. Still mid orgasm because his fingers drew it out until his own followed. A spurt of climax inside her and the rest between her thighs. Twitching and sticky.

Staining the sheets.

Lucy sank and let him finish, rubbing his cock a few final times between closed legs. She felt down for webs of seed and brought her hand up to see the filth. Evidence of him on her body. A smile tugged and she wiped her hand into the sheets. Stained them with a memory. Licked her palm once. Jim was still holding her tightly against him. Panting into her spine. Lucy adjusted, twisting to tuck herself under his chin.

A pulse beat. Nice and steady. Lips touched his sternum then neck. She hummed softly. Smelt burnt sugar over the scorch of him. They came down from the high. Slowly,

6:42am. Lucy wanted to stay here. In this bed. Drunken and fumbling around. His filth mixed with her own between hot thighs. Jim almost fell again with her pressed into his body like this. His mouth touched Lucy's crown. Black hair shifted.

"Mmmfff," she groaned into his chest, "have to get up."

“Want to?” He mumbled, drawing his fingers up her spine in a way that pleaded. *Stay*.

“No.” A scoff because she forced herself to. Hands pushed up until she was sitting. Curling legs into her chest to place her chin upon them. She held herself and peered at him getting up too. “Coffee?”

“Why not?” Jim watched her fix the nightie and stand.

“You’re going to be late. You still need to go home for your uniform, Chief.” She teased, tossing his boxers at him when he couldn’t find them. Lucy pulled on a robe and went into the bathroom. Washed her hands so she could take her shot. Jim peered to see. He’d seen it before. She always hid away like it was a dirty thing. Lifted her nightie to inject a carefully prescribed morning dose of insulin after pinching her stomach. Lucy caught him staring and shoved the silk down. Massaged the spot when it tingled.

“I’m always late.” He answered at last.

“Flo is going to kill you.” Lucy came to him like she might kiss him. Shut the door instead with a smile so she could pee and brush her teeth.

“Cats have nine lives, they say.” Jim called, pulling his under shirt on.

“You’ve used at least seven, Jim.”

“Can’t waste the last two, I guess.” He traded with her. She went into her kitchen, started a pot. The bitter scent plumed when Jim emerged in his clothing from last night, rubbing his eyes. He watched Lucy carefully measure some cream and stir it into a mug.

“Shut it.”

“Didn’t say anything.” He came around. “Is it completely pointless for me to ask if you have sugar?”

“Cupboard, just behind my head. Karen left it when I helped with a bake sale thing. Few months ago. Go nuts.” She poured him a mug. Jim added cream and sugar without a care. No measurements. “I

won't tell Flo you're using the real stuff instead of the artificial crap she keeps feeding you."

"Let me make you breakfast." Jim shrugged. Paused because he had to say it. "I won't kill you."

Lucy tried not to snort mid sip when he went into her fridge.

"A man after my heart, not my pancreas. Finally some true romance."

Was that too forward to say? Did she care? How strange.

"I can cook a mean omelet." Jim raised his head. "Won't make a mess of your pristine kitchen."

"Only if I help." It was all so domestic. Jim cracking eggs while she cut a small tomato. Neither said much, the air was clear.

Lucy caught a whiff of lavender over the heat of breakfast cooking. A forever calming scent she didn't mind to occupy the air. It always brewed as tea leaves do. Too much worked a little like belladonna. A warm bath you might drown in or Sleeping Beauty pricking her finger on a spindle. Sometimes Lucy thought she smelled it before going hypoglycemic, only then did it set her on edge.

Jim was contented there, folding eggs over with a spatula while she washed a bowl out. Things like safety and comfort were hard scents to place. More stark liked hot spiced peaches or amber perfume. It was a scent she placed on Jim Hopper standing behind her in this kitchen. She thought to wrap her arms around him. Coax him back into bed. Let the clock tick and the eggs burn.

She realized the last man to cook for her had been her father. Dearly departed. That peachy amber spice infected her own lungs. Made her mouth water.

"Plates?" He pulled her back to focus. Two clicked down so he cut the food in half. Scooped them up. They went to her table and ate across from each other. Morning sun up finally to greet them. No going back, she supposed.

“What are you doing later?” Jim sat back. Tried to be sly about it. Not sly enough. Lucy’s lip quirked. She peered down as if she were shy.

“Few errands to run today. I *do* work tomorrow,” she replied, brown eyes lifting to see his amusement, “so the alarm stays on.” Were they dating? Were they together? She was too tired to decipher such things the same way she pulled the scents of emotions apart like stitches on a quilt.

They’re friends.

Old friends who...

And now they...

Lucy bit her lip again, eyes elsewhere.

“I guess you’ll just have to call before you leave work. You know how to call a girl, right?”

Direct hit.

“Let’s see, you press the...uh, I’ll have Flo teach me.” He chuckled.

“The world it’ll open for you, Jim.” Lucy put her elbow on the table in a way that was unlike her. Giggled softly at his expression. She always looked away when she smiled. All teeth and nose scrunching. Cute. Jim wondered about a polite way to tell her not to look away.

They finished breakfast. He even stayed to help clean up. Watched her meticulously wipe every inch of stove and counter. Figured he’d been cleaning wrong his whole life.

“See you later?” His head cocked, arms shifted to put on a brown jacket.

“Call,” Lucy said, “find out. I’ll test you.” Black hair flicked aside. Full, relaxed locks fell just at her shoulders. He was used to it being so styled. A touch of old Hollywood always upon her.

“Hope you don’t drill me too hard, Luce.”

Oh, the damn nickname made her heart flutter. Moths to light. His suggestive way about it brought a fuller laugh out. Smile. Teeth. Nose crinkle. Head turned to hide it.

Jim took her chin with two fingers. Leaned down and kissed her. Polite enough, he figured. Lucy was up on her toes. Fists pulled to her chest instead of grabbing at him like she wanted. A deadly, nervous habit ingrained into her synapses. Hopper pulled out to see her eyes still closed. Feel her sway into his frame. The expression on her face that came with being swept off her feet. Lashes batted at him.

“Send Flo and the boys all my love.” Lucy came down from her toes. Touched the floor and stayed there. By force.

“I won’t tell her I’m late because of you.” Jim winked, earning a scoff. Went out into the world and left their cozy bubble.

“Bye.” Lucy waited until his Blazer started to shut the door. Pressed herself into it like some giddy school girl. Smelt Jim in her house still. She padded back into her room. Saw the unmade bed and felt a bit of heat spark low in her stomach.

Lucy turned to her vanity and realized Jim’s hat was sitting there. Felt deliberate. An aimless reason to find his way back to her. He passed with flying colors. She touched the stiff material, picked it up with a biting grin. Ached. A divine ache women weren’t allowed to flaunt like men could.

She’d just hung his hat up when the doorbell rang once. Another smile. Something like genuine glee and happiness smelled citrusy. A full orange grove and leaves fanned by the swirl of wind. Lucy figured that’s how she smelt now.

“Jim, I swear, you’re going to be...” The words died when she opened that door. The scent of Jim Hopper in her house and on her skin faded. A fist pulled her robe closed when another pair of clear eyes flickered over her there. Unmade.

“Lucy.” That stern voice rotted her flourishing grove of sweet oranges.

“Martin.” She stared at him. Dr. Brenner all pressed and seamless. Hard angles to his expression. Back taut with his hands folded behind him. White hair smooth and styled just so. Handsome in an icy sort of unobtainable way. Lucy blinked and dropped her eyes to his chest out of sheer habit.

“Are you going to let me in?” He asked pleasantly. Caught her gaze and the air pulled.

“Yes. Sorry.” Breathless, she remembered herself. Remembered routine and manners. Stepped aside still holding her robe closed at her neck.

“Unusual for you to...look unkempt at this hour.”

Lucy peered around for anyone and shut the door. Locked it or he’d say something. She wet her lips.

“Sorry.” Another damned habit. Apologize for every wrong breath.

“No, you deserve to rest, Lucy. Enjoy a morning to your thoughts.” Encouraging and genuine, Martin Brenner rehearsed his care well. “Did you eat? Did you take your shot?”

“Yes.” Lucy tied her robe shut. Knotted it painfully around her stomach. Brenner went to her couch. The one she’d made out on with the Chief of Police just last night. Sat and patted the cushion next to him to invite her. Lucy clasped her hands. Crossed to sit obediently.

“Good,” he said, “very good.” His good girl. She tucked hair aside and stared down at her lap.

“Why...?” The sentence trailed for fear of sounding accusatory,

“Why am I here today?” He caught on. Stared at her face until she flicked her dark eyes up to his blue ones. Brenner preferred that. Directness. Anticipation was another smoky scent. Like a campfire in the distance when it’s dark and you’re wandering the woods alone. “Always so quick to think I have an agenda, Lucy.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

"No, but you did." Brenner loved to tell her how to feel. It was a favorite hobby. He dropped it this time because he was just so *kind*. A light smile that didn't crinkle his eyes followed. "I just came to see how you were doing. You know how I worry about you." His best girl. One hand reached out, brushed her chin. He saw the marks there on her neck that Jim left. The ones she'd so hoped to admire after the shower.

"Yes." Lucy stared at him. Looked into soulless eyes. Kept her face lax. "I'm fine."

"And you like your new doctor?"

"Yes, very much. He's nice to me. Better than the last. More knowledgeable about diabetics."

Brenner dropped his hand.

"Good. That'd good. Sometimes, I can't help but feel," Brenner admired her, "so proud of you." Lucy hated the warmth that brought her. Resented herself for it. "Really, I just stopped by to check in."

She remembered the answer he wanted.

"That's kind of you," she recited, "I appreciate it, Martin." First name basis always with them.

"And if you need anything more. Never be afraid to come to me."

"I won't. Really, I'm just following my routine. Working. I'm perfectly fine." *Oof*, Lucy almost believed herself that time. "If my doctor has any further news, I'll come to you first."

"Yes," Brenner was still beaming, "you will." He stood up. "Well, I won't keep you from the sun today. Enjoy it."

"I will. Thank you." Lucy got up to show him the door. Manners. Brenner turned to touch her face again. A mild caress down her jaw.

"Enjoy it, Lucy," he advised in a clinical sort of way, "while it lasts."

She shuddered after shutting that door. Clicked two locks that time

as if they were enough to protect her. Slid down it to hold her legs into her body. Shaken.

Brenner, who told her how to feel. Who allowed her to be this way out of the goodness of his heart. Who held too much over her because of one bleating mistake in her past.

Lucy dreamed that this would last. It felt good. That was enough, she thought.

She didn't cry because it wasn't part of the routine and she'd pushed it off enough. Lucy straightened herself and went to the shower. Undressed then waited for the water to heat. Peered at Jim's hat. Waiting.

Held onto that one thread of hope as everything else washed away.

Notes for the Chapter:

Like I said, just a test run with the center line, I plan to flash back a bunch. I'm going to wrap up my last two chps of WTL and focus on this. I will return to Lucy and Hop, thanks for being patient with me :) Leave words if you have them below.

2. Pomegranate Juice

Notes for the Chapter:

Ahhh! Thanks for being so patient. Since WTL came to a close in the main story, I've been itching to pick this one up! I'll probably leap across time here and there. Going back into Lucy's past to head toward the front. Weird writing about my experience getting sick last year as a diabetic here.

TW: Brenner. ./ Illness, vomiting, and light light talk of rape.

July 7th , 1958

Lucy would ruin her older sister's sweet sixteen party. Only ten years old and a sprightly child. There was a fair in town lingering this week from the annual 4th of July parties. Banners and floating lights. Games with loud winning jingles. Popcorn and cotton candy on the wind. A little kid's paradise.

"Lucy, come down from there!" Olivia Garland waved from a picnic table. Pretty in a regal sort of way. An elegant grace about her even in capri pants and a simple gingham blouse.

On cue, a mess of black hair sprung out from the edge of a tree branch. Swatch of dirt on her cheek and a leaf in those messy locks that made her look almost feral. Lucy. Not a care in the world. Dreaming still of castles and dragons from stories she adored.

"Mia, go save your sister."

"Don't get dirt on my dress, you little monkey." Hawkins High Princess, Mia Garland, plucked the girl up when she'd hung upside down there. Both giggling. Not a family rich in wealth, but in happiness.

"I had it all under control, Marti." Lucy stumbled as she found the grass. Bright red pants and a striped shirt. She looked out at the

games. The rides. The hanging prizes she secretly hoped to win.

Lights blurred together. Strange. Sunset crept.

“Go wash up, your father is going to take you on the Ferris wheel.” Olivia called. Sixteen year old teens joked about on the picnic table next to them. The cool kids. Eager for the rad, new roller coaster.

“You really want to load them with cake and set them free, Liv?” Donald Garland smiled and teen girls sighed. Handsome resident surgeon they all fawned over. He kissed his wife and pinched her side playfully.

“Not here, hon,” she snickered with a push at his chest. Another peck.

“I want to go with Marti.” Lucy begged. “Please.”

“Not happening.” Her sister cut, sitting on the picnic table between two friends. “Mom, can we go? We still want to make the drive-in tonight.”

“*Mommm*.” Lucy tugged at her mother’s shirt, voice rasping some because her poor throat was dried.

“Lucy, you’re not old enough.” Olivia ruffled black hair, the scent of her cinnamon hand lotion wafted sweetly. “You’ll have fun with us here.” Lucy grabbed a juice box and sucked with red cheeks.

“I’m not a baby anymore.” She grumbled, sitting because her head felt heavy. The juice spread along her tongue. Tart against a dull fruit taste that scratched her mouth. “...I have to pee again.”

“Again? That’s four times since we got here.” Mia screwed her face up.

“Mom, I have to go now.” Lucy tugged with a glazed look in her eyes. No one noticed her wobbling and tired. Fighting it because she just wanted to play and spin. A princess in a fairy tale surrounded by fireflies.

“Mia.” Olivia began.

“Not again. She can take herself.” Mia went back to her friends. Such a teenager.

“I got her, come on, kid.” One of Mia’s group jumped up. Waves of thick sandy blond hair around a chiseled face. Broad football player type. The current reigning Keg King.

“Thank you, James.” Olivia was distracted trying to get everything in order. Her husband already gone to the car for a few final touches.

“Jim is fine, Mrs. Garland.” Jim Hopper. Same age as Mia and part of her crowd. He smiled and reached for Lucy’s hand. She crossed her arms with a stiff upper lip.

“I can walk myself. I’m ten, not five.” The absolute sass.

“Got it, girlie.” Jim chuckled. Spunky kid. She paced at his side when his head cocked. “Having fun?”

“Ferris wheels are stupid, I want to go on the roller coaster. I want to play games and see the Funhouse. Punch a clown in the gut.”

“They don’t encourage that, but I’d pay to see it. Not scared, are you?” Jim teased, poking her shoulder.

“Never!” Lucy giggled with her toothy smile, looked at his face with huge brown eyes. So much vibrant life. She eyed a big bunny hanging behind him. Prize where you had to knock some cans down. Its plush fur was colored green, her favorite.

“You want that?”

“Too big for toys.” She side eyed it. Tried to be a big girl. Eyes squinted. “Can’t read the sign.”

Jim thought it funny because she was standing not far from it. Every time he’d seen the girl, she was up in a huge tree with a book in hand.

“Only a quarter to play.” He said. “How about I win it and give you the credit, but you have to tell me who your sister likes at school?”

“Troy Loomis.” Lucy shrugged, not even trying or missing a beat. Jim figured she would have told him that without the deal.

“Loomis?” Hopper laughed instead. “*Him?*”

“He has a motorcycle.” Lucy turned and went into the women’s room. She returned cleaned up and rubbing her eyes. “Is there a water fountain around?”

“You wonder why you’re spending the entire day in there?” Jim approached the game.

“My mouth is sandpaper. Tastes all funny like I sucked a pomegranate dry.” She blinked a few times. Tried to read faraway signs and felt light. Jim smacked some change down and got a ball.

“You won’t make fun of me if I lose, right?”

“I will.” She beamed, arms behind her back.

“Thank god I’m an only child.” He scoffed and aimed. First attempt missed. Second try knocked one. “Okay, Luce, you gotta be my good luck charm here.”

“Lose and I’ll just ask Troy.” She giggled as Jim swung. Knocked the cans all directions. Shock gripped him when he threw his arms up. “You did it! You did it!” A giddy Lucy bounced next to him. Clapping her hands.

“Green thing.” Jim found his cool and snatched the prize. “To my good luck charm.” He offered it so she squeezed the plush close.

“You’re way cooler than Loomis. He’s a creep.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” Jim nudged her to go and they went back to the tables.

“Mom, mom, look at this!” Lucy bounded over. Cake was sliced and Lucy drank her weight in water and juice. Nothing wet her mouth. Nothing. Food seemed caught in her throat. An hour passed as teens spread to different rides. “I have to pee again.”

“Lucy, no more drinks for you.” Olivia pulled her from the bench. Felt her daughter drag and wobble.

“I feel funny.” She said. “I can take myself, mom, it’s not far from you.”

“Lucy, wait a moment.”

The girl raced into the crowds and lights.

“She’s fine, ma.” Mia sat next to the Loomis kid, giggling. “Stop worrying.”

“Lucy...” Olivia saw the bunny sitting there with huge, shiny eyes and felt a chill. Up her spine. Smelled a rot in the air above the sweetness of cotton candy.

“I got her, dear,” Donald hurried off, “Lucy?”

She didn’t return. He checked the bathroom and saw a stall covered in vomit. Birthday cake and red punch.

“Lucy!” The frantic father called out. Olivia heard and perked up.

“Artemisia, your sister’s missing. Something wrong.” *Do you smell that?* She wanted to say. Sickly sweet mold. Acidic bile. A dry rot.

“Ugh, don’t use my full name, mom. It’s not my fault she...” Mia saw her mother’s wide eyes and sunk. Something certainly was wrong. “Lucy!” Teens spread out. Asking nearby parents and workers running the games and rides.

Olivia thought the worst of her daughter, but that would come after her time in this world was over.

Jim found the little girl in dark, patchy grass between two tents. Picked her up to race back.

“Hey! I got her! I got her!”

Olivia near crashed into the teen taking her daughter back. Cradling her close.

“Donald, she’s not waking up!” There was no color in her lips. Olivia brushed black hair back from sweaty, tanned skin.

“She needs a doctor.” He put an arm around them both.

“Lucy!” Mia raced after them. Dirt on her pretty dress. “Oh, my god.”

“Mia, you’re going?” Loomis scoffed.

“My sister’s hurt, *dickweed*.” That earned a chorus of *oohs* from teens. Mia went and Jim followed with a glance at their friends. Picked up Lucy’s plush to leave with them. Drove Mia to the hospital behind their parents and let her cry into his chest while they waited.

Olivia stood with a cold coffee between her shaken fingers. Gulped it down. She could tell it was brewed yesterday and watered down from the chalky taste of it. She had a refined palate, Donald liked to joke. He stood there by Lucy’s room and held his wife, looking through the glass at their small daughter hooked to machines and tubes.

“Mrs. Garland.” A doctor came out. Mia jumped up and Jim followed her over with his hands in his pockets. Lucy’s bunny crushed into her sister’s arms.

“What’s wrong with my little girl?” Olivia began.

“Your daughter has a blood sugar of over six hundred. That’s more than five times where it should be.” Eyes lifted from a clipboard. “We’ve got her on fluids and insulin. I’m afraid she’s-”

“A diabetic.” Donald frowned. “We don’t have many in the family. I should have watched her.”

“Your daughter is experiencing diabetic ketoacidosis. We’re lucky it was caught. Tell me, the last few days...has she been urinating frequently, complained about being thirsty, or vomiting?”

“Oh god,” Olivia shook her head, “we just...we didn’t see it.”

“Blurry vision?”

"She..." Jim blinked. Hushing. "Earlier, she tried to read this sign and...couldn't."

"Happens when your blood sugar changes dramatically. Once she wakes, and we're confident she will...after treatment, give it two weeks and she should be normal again. It's imperative to start her on insulin. There's so much we don't know still and we have to attack it. I have a specialist you can speak to, Dr. Garland, you know him. It's important that your daughter understands...this is for life. Everything has to change. I'm very sorry. But, you were lucky to catch it now. We'll see how she responds...if she comes down overnight. I'm optimistic."

"Can I go in?" Olivia held herself together and the doctor stepped aside.

"Of course."

** ** *

"Dr. Garland, can you sign some papers up front here?" A nurse poked her head into the room so Donald stood to go.

"You two don't have to stay." Olivia had Lucy's hand. Blush returned to her girl's cheeks over time.

"I want to." Mia sniffled, looking beat. "Thanks...for driving me, Jim."

"Don't worry about it." He shook his head. Lucy's lashes fluttered open.

"Mom?" She croaked.

"I'm here, baby, we're all here." A hand tucked hair aside. Lucy moved her tongue around to wet her lips.

"You scared us, twerp." Mia was up to hug her sister. Kissing her forehead.

"Am I sick?" Lucy asked and everyone just stared. Olivia welled and came to sit on the bed.

“Yes.” She said. “There’s...an organ in your body that’s just tired. It’s confused and it doesn’t quite know what to do.” *And it dictates the rest.*

“So, do I need a new one?”

“It’s complicated, sweetie. We’re going to change things. We have to encourage it to do its job. It needs our support.” Olivia explained. “There’s a shot, it’ll help you.”

“One shot and I’m cured?” Lucy’s big eyes blinked. She couldn’t grasp that this was for life. That there wouldn’t be a moment where she wasn’t aware of a sickness inside her. Threatening to rot her body from the inside out. “Mom, don’t cry.”

“I’m sorry.” Tears were wiped on the back of her hand. “I’m sorry, baby. We’re going to fight this. You and I. We’ll learn everything we need and you’ll just take extra special care of yourself. Can you promise me that? Promise you’ll always be careful? You’ll be safe.”

Lucy felt there was no choice.

“I promise.”

** ** *

“Mia, you’ve been here so long, I’m sorry...about the party.” Olivia whispered awhile later outside the hospital room.

“I can go to the drive-in anytime. I want to help.”

“No, no, just...go home. Your father and I will deal with this. Lucy...she’s gonna have to grow up. She has so much to learn and you need to rest.”

“I can take her home.” Jim offered down the hallway. Mia caved a little, held herself.

“Going to say bye.” She went around her mother and Hopper followed. “Lucy, how’re you feeling?”

“They said I was down to two hundred. That it was good.” A

toothy, tired grin followed. "I don't like needles."

She'd be getting used to them.

"Hopefully, you can come home tomorrow. We'll watch some TV." Mia hugged her.

"I ruined your party...and mom and dad were fighting."

"No, that wasn't your fault."

"They fought in the hallway over money and doctors." Lucy welled. They never fought before. "If I wasn't here, they wouldn't fight and you'd have a good party."

"Hey, don't talk like that. Never again. Mom and dad will figure this out and I love you. We'll hang out in the treehouse and read comics."

"Batman and Wonder Woman?"

"You know it." Mia kissed her cheek. Jim approached to offer the stuffed bunny.

"Still my lucky charm, eh? Get well, kid."

"Thanks," Lucy paused, "you're cool even if you don't have a motorcycle."

"What's...?"

"Inside joke." Jim winked at Mia's expression and Lucy snickered. Sisters hugged again.

"I'll see you at home soon."

** ** *

Olivia Garland planned Lucy's days after to the letter. No surprises. Strict routine. Mild life. Control. No more climbing trees. No more sugary treats. She ate her correct fill of carbs, she didn't drink them. Each snack and meal was planned around two shots a day. Carefully

separated portions.

Lucy stopped asking when the shots would end after the first month.

At twelve, she was giving them herself. Morning and evening.

At thirteen, the treehouse was locked tight. Lucy fell out of it. That day didn't go down easily.

She was kept inside. Away from loud fairgrounds and parks. Learned the piano. Sewing. Paper crafts. Inside hobbies. Read for hours on end because there was so little to do. Mia went out to parties and followed a path of science. Lucy lived through her hand-me-downs and stories.

At fourteen, a horrid fit of hypoglycemia at school made her an easy target. Kids threw candy in her hair and poured soda down her shirt.

"You should of seen this chick spaz out," a senior boy mocked with his friends behind the bleachers. Tall and lanky. "Sugar Baby, that's what we'll call you."

"Buzz off, asshole." Lucy muttered, trying to go around him. A sweaty hand pushed at her shoulder. His friends laughed.

"Sugar Baby, speak up." He cocked a fist back and played like he might hit her. Just to make her cringe away. "Thought so."

Lucy's hand crept into Mia's old brown messenger bag hanging by her waist. Fingers curled around a sharp pencil. They kept laughing. Mocking. Pushing at her.

A knee found the leader's crotch, sending him back before his giddy following.

"Little bitch!" He cocked his arm again after recovering. Aimed for her cheekbone. Lucy's hand snapped up. Sharp lead pointed first.

"Fuck!" The howl sent crows flapping to get away. Blood dripped from lead after he nailed it with his punch. Lucy got around him. Ran

as fast as she could.

She stopped believing in princes and princesses this day. Dragon's fire and sparkling castles. Summer nights that underscored a big Hollywood kiss. No instrumental would play as a man crashed his lips upon hers. Promising to spirit her away. She would never be a beautiful starlet coveted by starry eyes.

Tears leaked because she missed climbing trees. Her only solace was the piano and dreams of clouds billowing while she played for an audience waiting to throw red roses. For a lover in the wings lingering to tell her she'd done so well.

Making that horrible boy bleed caused unreasonable heat within her body. A static of fireworks within a tightly kept rib cage.

She'd never admit to getting off to it later. Never address that unhidden part of herself until years later.

They chased her all the way to the corner of Cabrini and Green where she lived. House 237 on Cabrini Avenue. The one with the massive willow tree out front, spooky to onlookers.

"Hey!" A voice echoed at the same time Lucy threw herself behind a man just trying to take his garbage out. Benny Hammond. About the same age as Jim and Mia. Huge guy like an ox. "What's going on here?"

The boys skidded upon seeing that furious face.

"Get out of here! Don't come back!" Benny had one arm around Lucy, partially to hold her up as she burrowed into his side half behind him. Boys ran with their tails between their legs. "Hey, you're okay. Let's get you home, I bet Liv is out of her mind."

Benny brought Lucy in, watched her parents fawn and stayed for coffee.

Lucy sat at her piano bench alone and quiet. Realized the pencil was still gripped tight in her fist. The blood darkened there at the edge. She sharpened it with a few twists until it looked like nothing had happened. Until she could forget the obscene warmth it brought

her. Slipped it away into her bag while black hair curtained her face.

"Lucy, why don't you play something?" Don crossed into the room. One hand on her shoulder. "Your mother's been dying to hear *Ave Maria*."

"She always is." Lucy wet her lips, eyes lifting to a crow perched upon the treehouse out back. Just beyond the glass door.

Fingers positioned upon keys, deft and deliberate. They struck hard.

At fifteen, she was left alone. Utters of *Sugar Baby* where more behind her back. Not to her face. Hawkins was a small town. Loved all the chatter either way.

Her parents loved her. They bickered over money, but made it work even if the specialists bled them dry. Talented surgeon and winning art history professor. They made Lucy the center of their world.

They *loved* her. But, they smothered her. And Mia fell behind some. Tried not to resent her sister for it when her parents missed things. When they couldn't afford a limo or a nice prom dress. Lucy was not allowed to her prom.

Lucy was the baby. She needed this and that. She couldn't do things Mia could.

"Your sister is ill, she needs me." Olivia loved her daughter and she sheltered her from a messy world with this routine. Something she lost herself in. Lucy had grown up. Too fast. Stayed at home with her books and sheet music. Fantasies of princes and princesses living happily ever after fluttered so far. Couldn't join after school clubs or take long, luxurious walks.

Mia could run a state away and back, but her sister never could. Two siblings who somehow grew in the other's shadow.

Lucy kept to herself. Never a Hawkins High princess. Kids were cruel to outsiders and Lucy was always on the other side of something she could not have.

Mia excelled. Pretty and popular. Kind. Understanding even when that human jealousy burned. Even when she figured their mother would always favor Lucy first, no matter her resistance. Mia was more her father's daughter anyway. Entered a med school program with all her saved money and good scholarships. Moved in with a friend. Not Jim Hopper who she would never have a crush on. He joined the front lines right out of school.

Lucy always figured Mia would be happier not hearing about her sister and her sickness. Held back the fact that her closest friend in this world was gone.

Olivia cut her college courses down to make more time for Lucy at sixteen. A change that was loathed because all she did was hover. Force juice down her throat when hypoglycemia crept. Creep into her room at night to ensure Lucy was still breathing. Went to every doctor's appointment.

And Lucy just wanted out. College and money was how she was going to get out. Away from these warm bodies who smothered her.

1965

"Mrs. Cotton offered you a position at her salon."

"...Mom, I can't even style my own hair." Lucy blew a strand out of her face. Locks piled high and twisted at her crown. Seventeen years old. A strange and stunning girl. Just graduated. Party included a veggie tray and some neighbors in the backyard. The bright light was Benny bringing his dogs over to play.

"It's shampooing and sweeping. Reception. And you'll be just on main street, I could drive you every day."

"I don't know, I'll think about it." Lucy finished the dishes and dried her pruning hands. Drank a cool glass of water. Her mother just stared all somber and waiting. "What?"

"I just think-"

"Mrs. Cotton's a hag, mom, I'm not working for her." Lucy put her foot down. "I'll save up for college myself. I can do this. I want to. I'm

going to play piano in a pretty dress and get buckets of red roses dumped at my feet.” A girl could still dream.

“And who will drive you to school for music?”

“I’ll take the bus or live near campus with someone. Same as everyone else.”

“Baby, you’re not like everyone else.” Olivia took her face. She meant so well. “Just stay here. Please, this is too fast.”

“Liv, honey. She’s just graduated.” Donald came between them. “Give her some room to breathe, we can figure this out.”

“I know... I’m sorry. We just want what’s best for you. Who will make sure you’re not slipping too low, huh?”

“I know, mom, but I...” A crack. “I can’t do this forever.”

“You still don’t understand after all these years,” she sniffled, “you have to.”

“Okay, I need to take a walk.” Lucy grabbed the trash and recycling to take it out. Practically ran. Shoving bags in the dumpster. Papers went everywhere and a curse shuddered.

“Ma’am, no littering.” A deep voice caught.

“I...” Lucy jumped up with nervous hands fixing frayed waves of hair. “Jim?” In uniform too. Straight edge stance and all. Handsome. “Jim Hopper? I can’t believe it’s you. Look at you. Your hair is so short...”

“Thinning on me already.” He rolled his eyes, grinned. “Look at you, Luce, still lucky?”

“Not at all.” She bit her lip and hugged him, top of her head just barely past his shoulder. “How’d you get taller? I haven’t seen you since Marti graduated.”

“Ah, I managed it somehow.”

“Did you just get in?”

“Yeah, I’m only in town for a bit. Was going to see Ben actually. Mia here?”

“No, she’s living just outside Hawkins. Dreaming of being a fancy surgeon like dad. Call her *Nurse* and she’ll kill you.”

“She hasn’t changed.” Jim laughed and Lucy followed, letting her hair down before she held herself. “How are you? How’re you feeling these days?”

Funny, he’d been the first person to ask such a thing in a long time. Without pity.

“Ah...tired. Okay. My mother and I have the whole song and dance down. So we think. Dose needed fixing again. Never ending. Graduated, thankfully.”

“No shit. Where you going next? Stage, I bet. Got a boyfriend?”

“My mother would like me to say nowhere and my boyfriend took another girl to prom.”

“Ouch. Sorry.” His brow furrowed. “His loss.”

A blush. All rose petals. Lucy stared at his eyes and tucked hair aside.

“You ever get that motorcycle, Jim?”

“No, I’m still not as cool as Loomis.”

“Ah, he’s still a creep actually.” She joked and he smiled at her. “Whole family tree was full of rotten apples because I dated his cousin. Until prom.”

“What a dick.” Jim laughed with ease that followed her lungs.

“He’s an asshole. Can’t blame him for wanting a healthy girl, but...” Lucy peered at the crinkled newspaper atop the recycling, plucked it up. Fate. “I have a few ideas for next. It’s good to see you, Jim. I

should...”

“Yeah, I won’t keep you from...” he paused to step aside. Fingers touched her wrist, slipped down idly.

“See you around? Small town.”

“You look great.” Jim’s hair was cropped so damn short when he ran a hand into it, pulling his hat off. She peered down at Mia’s old saddle shoes on her feet. They circled each other, unable to pull too far away.

“What about you though? What’s next?”

“Starting up with the boys in blue.”

“How noble.” Lucy smiled again. Still a charming guy. Eyes flickering. “Big city dreams?”

“Down the line. Just seemed like the most obvious step.” He shrugged. “You take care, got it?”

“You too, Jim. Good to have you back for a bit.” Lucy touched his hand and went around him. Peered back awkwardly after he did. Missing it. Hands smoothed out the newspaper as she walked.

Hawkins Lab. Offering a wad of cash to anyone interested in a study.

“Up to two thousand dollars.” Lucy read to herself, the cool breeze pushing against her hair. A winning jingle from a carnival game trilled in the distance. Grey skies cast and she smelt a storm on the wind. Something landed next to her and cawed.

“Shit!” She jolted back. Damn huge crow, almost looked big enough to be a raven. Shining beady eyes turned at her.

Head cocked.

Lucy turned away. Kept walking. Kept reading until she got to a phone booth. Pushed coins in the slot.

“Reception, how can I direct your call?”

“Yes.” Lucy saw the crow perching again before her. Beak opening like it was silently screaming there. “I, ugh...who can I speak to about this study in the paper?”

“Name and birthday?”

“Lucy Garland. March 15th, 1948...”

“Young.”

There was a pause of a pencil scratching. Lucy thought to hang up but didn't.

“You can come in for an interview with the doctor. Can you see us tomorrow, nine o'clock sharp?”

“Um, yes, I can. I can do that. Ah, an interview?” Lucy's eyes darted, clear nerves all up and down her voice.

“We want to ensure you're...the right fit. Is that a problem?”

“No! Not at all.” Lucy swallowed. “Who is the doctor exactly?”

“That'd be Dr. Brenner. You'll ask for him at the gate. Give your name and birthday.”

"Dr. Brenner." She tasted the name. Dull fruit twanging along her tongue. But, briefly. “Right. Nine.”

“Don't be late.”

They hung up.

Lucy blinked at the phone. Put it down. Outside, a black feather sat at her feet. Sweeping away into the wind.

Now to lie to her mother.

** ** *

“A job interview? But, Mrs. Cotton-”

“It’s for nicer place, mom.” Lucy explained over dinner. Pasta. Except her noodles were made of zucchini. Olivia was clever with foods. “It’s not far. I thought...I could drive myself. Clear my head.”

“What is this place?”

“Travel agency. They pay alright. Do all my training if they like me. I’d be in an office all day. I can keep my routine with the hours.”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s just the interview...if I don’t like it, I can just say no.”

Lucy didn’t realize that wouldn’t be the case at all.

“I’ll tell you everything, ma.”

“Liv, she can drive herself after her shot and a good breakfast. It’s exciting.”

“Alright. But, call when you’re out. Tell me all about it. Check in.”

“I will.” Lucy pressed her lips. “Promise.”

** ** *

Hawkins Lab was perched in wait. Surrounded by a chain link fence. A fortress.

“Name.” The guard leaned toward Lucy’s open window.

“I’m...Lucy Garland. 03-15-48. I was told to ask for a Dr. Brenner.” She sputtered.

“Wait here.” He made a call in his booth, eyes on Lucy the entire time. She gripped the wheel. More crows landed on the fence. A murder. “Go on in. Park in the left lot. They’re expecting you.”

“Alright.” Lucy cleared her throat. Drove forward when it began to sprinkle. The newspaper clutched to her chest was shoved into a scuffed purse. She parked her family’s rusted orange truck.

Rain matted hair around flushed cheeks, made her look like a wet

dog for the damn interview because she didn't bring an umbrella. Shaken and dripping, Lucy approached an unimpressed, dolled up receptionist. Wet in her mother's blouse and skirt. Mia's old coat pulled close. Father's belt wrapped around her waist.

Lucy so often felt that she was made of little pieces from other people. A patchwork quilt like her grandmother used to make. Nothing was original. Nothing was all hers to hold close.

"Hi, I'm-"

"Have a seat, they'll see you shortly."

"Right..." Lucy went to a chair and was sitting when the door shot open. A broad man in a lab coat smiled at her. Stubble on his face. Light brown eyes and blond hair. About thirty. Square jaw, peachy skin. Cold gaze not matched by his brighter expression.

"Ms. Garland. You're early. Good. Very good."

"Dr. Brenner?"

"No, I'll take you to him. I'm Dr. Myers. The psychologist. Logan, if you're here to stay."

"Stay?"

"This way please, Ms. Garland." He wasted no time so Lucy hurried after. "In here. Take a seat." Logan paused, square glasses pushed up his nose. Reached toward her cheek with his thumb to swipe something. "Eyelash. They say you're supposed to make a wish."

Her quivered exhale sent it fluttering. No words because wishes were always a secret.

"Hope it was a good one."

She peered away, lips tugged by teeth.

"Thank..." Lucy looked up and he was gone. "...you." She peered around. Wall to wall bookshelves. Everything placed just so in order. Even the pens on his desk were straight. Evenly spaced. She tried to

fix her hair. Damp waves long over shoulders.

The door opened and a blue suit came in. About her father's age. Fair brown hair and a hard, sly face. She shot up. Hand out to be brave.

"Hi. I'm Lucy Garland."

"Lucy." He mused, taking her hand to shake it stiffly. "Like the TV show. Garland, like the actress. Martin Brenner. Doctor."

"Nice to meet you, doctor."

"Thank you for coming on such short notice." He went around the desk and faced her. "We're trying to see all interested parties in a timely manner."

"I understand." She sat mechanically when he did. Blue eyes burned into her. Scanning.

"My, my. Only seventeen. You're a little younger than we like, I must say. We prefer more...legal college age and above."

"Oh." Lucy fidgeted her hands in her lap. Stopped when he glanced down. This swell of judgment because she didn't look her best. He stared at her and plucked at his typewriter without breaking stride. "I've just graduated. Almost to college and-"

"Would you like some tea?"

"No, but thank you." It felt as if that were the wrong answer by his expression so she stammered. "I had my fill at breakfast." *This is going bad already. Fuck.*

"Lucy. Is that short for Lucille?" It still seemed like a test. Like he was trying to tease something out of her.

"It's..." She trailed off, lowered dark eyes. Didn't want to fail this one. Brenner was patient. Hands clasping to give her his undivided attention. "It's actually short for Lucretia."

"Ah. How formal." *Prehistoric is more like it.*

“My mother is a professor of art history. Named my sister Artemisia after the painter.” *Please, don't ask my middle name.*

“And you don't like it?” He'd inquired. She wondered if he'd faked interest.

“It's, ah, a mouthful. Little old fashioned.” Lucy peeked up to see him staring pointedly.

“Lucretia. She wasn't a painter, but a famous subject. Was she not?” Brenner got her to nod. Sat back with a pen between his idle fingers. Observed her stilling before him.

“Yes, she was.”

“An ancient Roman woman, if I recall, whose tragic fate played a pivotal role in the Roman Kingdom transitioning to the Roman Republic. A lot of blood was shed.” Brenner recited. “Do you remember what she did?”

Did this man want to interview her or recall history?

“She...” Lucy held his eyes. “She killed herself.”

“How?”

“...Stabbed herself in the heart.”

“Why did she do that, Lucy?” He watched her sit up and lick her lips, shrinking back into the plush chair.

“A man...hurt her. Threatened her. Ruined her reputation.”

“Hurt her, how exactly?”

“The man, he raped her.” She whispered that.

“The son of a king.” Brenner corrected lightly. “Why would your mother name such a pretty girl off a grisly subject?”

“Her death fed a rebellion.” Lucy recalled, more so to herself to be bolder. Brenner tapped the pen upon his chin. “She'd rather die on

her own terms than be used by a tyrant. That touched people. They felt it too, I guess.”

“What do you think?”

“It’s sad.”

“Sad?”

“That a woman had to be tortured and die because of forced virtue for people to stand up at all.” Lucy looked at the typewriter. Hands folding. “I’m not saying it was all for nothing. Something came out of it. Something is better than nothing. But, people remember her because she was raped before anything else. Sometimes suffering is just that and her story isn’t her own anymore. That’s what I think...sir.”

Brenner seemed charmed at that.

“In avenging her. One girl who made a mess of things. They built a republic upon her body. A brave new world she wouldn’t live to see.” Brenner’s eyes slid up and down Lucy. Tone changed. “You’re just so young.”

“Sorry.” Lucy wasn’t sure why that was something to apologize for.

Another beat shift.

“Are you pregnant?”

“What? I...”

“You’re very pretty.” He added coolly. Smooth and supple. She thought of that pen running her jawline.

Lucy laughed. Nerves settled in her stomach and bloomed up chilled skin. Pink tinted cheeks. Brenner smiled softer. If he had such a mode.

“No, I’m not.”

“Not pregnant or not pretty?”

“Oh.” She looked like tart pomegranate juice tinted her lips and cheeks. *Red. Red. Red.* “Not pregnant.” More giggles and stammering. “Sorry.”

“It’s very becoming to make such a young woman blush, do I make you nervous?”

“No, sir. Not you. Def-*Definitely* not you.” She was giggling almost even still. He went hard again.

“Do you have plans to become pregnant?”

“What? No, I don’t...I don’t.” Lucy really couldn’t get anything right here. He seemed bored of her now after complimenting so sweetly.

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No, sir, I don’t have-”

“Doctor is fine.” Brenner stood up. Towered. “What size are you, Lucy?” He drilled her. Pulling and pulling for *something* she wasn’t giving up. She stared, lips parting. Cheeks flushed.

“I...I think that depends on-”

He only sighed. No seeds of rebellion would be built upon her trembling heart.

“Lucy, I fear you might be too young. Is it the money drawing you?”

“Y-Yes.” She admitted at last. Near tears. “It is.”

“Tell me why. Details are preferred.”

“My family... Well, I’m a diabetic and it’s been hard on us, money wise. I just want-”

“You bled your family dry.” The bluntness brought heat back up her neck. “Is that right?” His head tilted and a pang stabbed her chest. Maybe Lucretia had the right idea with how mortifying this interview was. What did this man want over her? “And college, your

parents would let such a sick girl out of her cage?"

"They don't want me to be far and I'm not in a..." She stopped. Froze. "Forgive me, doctor, I think I've wasted your time. I should go."

Brenner stared at her. Hands clasped. Didn't deny it.

"Apologies. I've caused you discomfort." He crossed to the door and she turned her head, inhaling. A waft of the air around him. It plucked something in her heart.

"Is that *Colonia*?" Lucy touched the back of her chair, looking up at him. Martin Brenner stopped. Slowly turned back to see her eyes with the door opened.

"Hm?"

"Your cologne." She cocked her head. "Acqua Di Parma's *Colonia*. Sorry, my...my father wears it too." Lucy stood up quickly to get out of his hair.

The door snapped shut on her so fast, she almost bumped into it.

Brenner had his hand on the brass knob, inches away. Lucy stared at his chest so he waited until she looked up. A spark.

"It is." Blue eyes squinted at her. A whole new light. "I wear it sometimes..."

"I-"

"But, not today." Lips curled up. Slow and easy. Like a bear trap being pushed open in wait for a hungry wolf.

"Oh."

He turned and stepped into her space. Crept. Lucy slid back until she was pressed into a chair with him hovering. Much taller.

Not the son of a king, just an idealistic man who saw souls as batteries for a greater machine. Who would suck the juice from her

skin like a pretty summer peach.

“Sharp nose you have. Tell me about that. Details...are preferred.”

Lucy blushed again when he beamed at her. Intimate. Hands clasped behind his back.

“It’s silly.”

“I assure you, Lucy, it’s not.” Brenner held her gaze steady. One finger tipped her chin up. “Reconsider that cup of tea. You’re chilled to the bone, dear.” *Let’s warm you up. Draw a charge.*

“Okay.” Lucy fell into the chair. He poured from a too fancy pot. It felt he had this control over her. Simply in getting her to agree to a cup of warm tea.

“Cream and sugar?”

“One sugar. Splash of cream.” She felt air being pulled. Took the cup and sipped. Brenner poured his own and followed. Fingers clasped.

“Lucy Garland. Short of Lucretia. Tell me about yourself. In detail. Don’t be so nervous.”

She looked into his eyes. Felt she might suffocate and unfurled.

“I’m just trying to start my life. I’m sick and I’m tired and ordinary. I just want-” *Normal.*

“I think you’re special.” He sounded so genuine about it. A switch flipped. People didn’t say that to her.

More pomegranate juice and rose petals. Trickling down flesh.

“You think I’m special?” Not the sick girl who hides away. Not the girl dwindled to pins and needles. The girl who stayed in to play piano alone while her sister rode motorcycles with boys and studied whatever she wanted.

Lucy was chipped away. Patchwork. They prodded and mocked

until she was a hard, withered pit.

It bloomed warmth.

“Describe this...sense you have.”

“Well,” Lucy bit her lip, leaned toward his desk, “we joke that I get it from my mother. She has this odd sense of taste. She can taste anything and just know what’s in it. Recreate it from memory without a recipe and she’s never been a chef or anything, she just understands how flavors fit together.”

“Go on.” All encouragement. Lucy waded into it.

“And she has this crazy sense of smell too. Walk into a busy kitchen and pick out the slightest spices. I can do it too. We all swear she smelt the cancer on my grandmother long before she took ill. She’s...sensitive to flavors and smells. Empathetic in a way. Sometimes, she gets overwhelmed by them. Once, she...came home from a neighbor's house in tears.”

“What is it that she sensed?”

“She was all shaken up. I was only thirteen. Brought him a meal to cheer him up. Said the house smelled like...metal. Like blood. Perfectly clean house, just...in mourning. It was an odd way to describe a house. Next day, we find out the man shot himself at daylight. Three days after his wife died in childbirth. Her and the baby. It was 1961...last suicide in Hawkins, if you believe it. I don’t know...moms have a sense for things, I think, even if they’re not always looking at you.”

“I completely agree.” He’d mused.

“Kind of like God, you know? Sometimes all they can do is listen and look forward and still be unable to save their children. My mom gets a little sick to her stomach and not because it’s too much or rich, she’s just sensitive, she’s...”

“Special.” Brenner produced.

“Special.” Lucy repeated quieter. Numb somehow after all the

prattling. And he listened. Intently. Like she was something great. Something riveting. Fingers slipped away from the tea cup.

“Your sister. Named after the painter. Another raped woman.” Brenner had no qualms, the way he said it. “Does she have it too? This funny little sense.”

“Marti? No, she’s never been in tune with that stuff. All logic, that one. She takes after our father. But, mom gets a feel about things from smell and from the taste of the air and...she’s always right. Sometimes we realize too late. It’s a...funny, family thing. We don’t-”

“Fascinating.” Brenner sat back. “Lucy, you’re young. But, I don’t know, there’s something about you. Something locked up tight. Perched behind your slender throat.” His hands lifted, closing for effect.

Lucy wondered if he’d offer her a knife to cut it open. Her throat. She wondered if she’d do it. Just because he asked sweetly and made her blush. She thought of him staying to let the blood pool out her cheeks and around his shiny shoes. Thought he wouldn’t step away when it happened.

“I’m running a study here on willing minds. You know the saying: the soul is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

“Yes.” Teeth tugged at her bottom lip.

“I think, Lucy, that this world and this illness inside you...I think they’re chisels tapping away at you. And I found you,” Brenner grew soft, “just in time. Aren’t you tired? Always falling behind. Always unable to participate in life. What we do here can help you flourish. It can help others too. This isn’t just about money for you, this is your existence on the line. One chance to get out and change things. Make an impact for the first time in your young life. Don’t you want it?”

“I guess, when you put it that way-”

“You’d be in a controlled environment. Much like you are now. It is my last wish to make you do something that causes discomfort.” Genuine. She believed it at the time. “You’d be under the influence

of...something to expand you. Something to help you bloom.”

“...Drugs?”

“Airing on the, shall we say, *psychedelic* end. Nothing harmful.” Brenner smiled. “You won’t be hurt. None of you. Humans are extraordinary creatures, Ms. Garland. We believe there are no limits to what the body and brain can do...when pushed. There is something inside you under weak flesh and that illness waiting to be charged. You shouldn’t deny it any longer. That’s all we want to do. Push. See what manifests. And you’ll be rewarded handsomely for your cooperation. I imagine you have dreams of a big world ahead of you. I’d like to personally help you reach those stars.”

Brenner nurtured her. Easily. It almost felt like he was holding her. Like his cologne wrapped her in a safety net.

“All I need from you is a yes and a signature. Or two.”

“I...” Lucy stared at the paper he slid over.

“Two thousand dollars. Your ticket out of here, Lucy. All the clawing. All the bleeding your poor parents dry. Standing behind a sister who isn’t...limited...like you are. Don’t you want it to stop? You could start your life.”

“Dr. Brenner, it’s a kind offer.”

“Please, call me Martin.” He only beamed at her. “I’d like us to be on a first name basis. Equals.” His illusion was set so well. “Would you like that?” The bear trap snapped shut.

“I would,” she paused and only blushed again, “Martin.”

“I’m going to oversee you personally. Rest assured, I’ll keep you safe.” Brenner’s tone lowered. A promise. Lucy thought of crows screaming. Black feathers caught in the wind. He placed a pen into her hands. “We can start you Monday, if you like.”

This was something Brenner excelled at as Lucy would get to know. Making one think it was all their idea.

The dotted line awaited her to seal this fate.

Ink bled.

Lucy signed her name in elegant curves. Looked up to see Brenner grin at her.

“Wonderful,” he said, “just wonderful.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm really excited to explore this fic now that I can focus on it! God, writing that interview was the ultimate cringe comp. But flexing my art history love is always a win.

Thanks so much and chat with me below on or tumblr, Alias-B !! xoxo

3. Kaleidoscope Sirens

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all, Hawkins Lab stuff starts here. Be forewarned, it's explicit and not pretty.

TW: drug use, abuse, death, torture, and major gas lighting from Brenner. Brenner is his own warning tbh

Summer 1982

The flowers were dead. They'd been dying far too slowly overtime.

Lucy stared at the wilted, brown mass keeled over in soil. Like it wanted to go. She'd tried to keep them awake as years passed. Only thing that stuck with her was the vibrant grass and the great willow tree. Not much else. Not the rose bushes. The pretty dahlias. The forget-me-nots in every window. All gone now. She thought of a stiff wolf on its back with a graying tongue hanging out of its mouth. Eyes wide and glassy.

Her mother and father had such green thumbs. Marti did too. Lucy didn't inherit that ability to nurture life. It felt like a part she just played on television.

And without them here...

A sigh as summer wind blew. She crouched in her nice heels. Hands clawing for the decay to cut it out by the very root. It resisted and then gave in. Much like her so often.

That was something deep to mourn.

Lucy looked at the filth upon her hands after tossing the earthy mass in the trash bin. Under her nails.

A thrill rushed. It felt comforting to see it. She thought to touch her cheeks and clothing.

“Lucy.” A beaten pick up pulled closer on its way down the street.

“Benny,” eyes lifted from the dirt to see him, “off to open?”

“Yeah, might close early today and hit the lake with Earl and them.” Benny leaned over the side of his car, arms crossing to smile at her. Lucy came closer. Inhaled campfire and citrus, sweet oranges over the car exhaust. Anticipation. Happiness. Benny always brightened upon seeing her. “If you feel like a visit at lunch, there might be a side of hot fries in it for you.”

“Well, you know I can’t ever resist your food or company.”

Lucy liked Benny. He liked her too, but sometimes that signaling waft of lusty burnt sugar alerted her to something more being there. He never acted on it. Just joked and flirted because he was sweet to the core without a hard pit. Burnt sugar was common for her now. It still shocked. Being coveted and pretty. The way she blushed less and flirted more. Lucy had influence. Maybe not where she wanted currently. But, a girl could make due.

She wondered if Jim would come over for his hat tonight. Press her into the wall and slide fingers she’d be sucking later between hot thighs.

Lips spread. Painted a plum mauve today instead of candy apple red.

“How’s Marti? Have you talked to her lately?”

Lucy blinked. Lied over the hum of a car engine.

“Yes. She’s transferred hospitals, likes her knew place. Said she can see the ocean from her window. I bet it’s beautiful.”

“Good for her. Still punching any idiot who calls her nurse?”

“You bet.” Lucy displayed her teeth that time. Watched him beam back.

“Well, I’ll see you later. Maybe at lunch if you need some bad jokes to pick you up.”

"You know that I always do, Ben." Lucy paused, looking down at her dirt crusted fingers. Guilt wedged under nails that she'd be scrubbing out until the skin was bubblegum pink. "Have a good one."

"You too, Lucy." He peeled out to go down the street. Summer sunlight washed her hair, brought the golden brown tones out of cool black. She went back inside to wash her hands in the kitchen. Peered at the treehouse locked so tight out back. The balmy heat washing down green grass, beaming through the glass to illuminate her dark house.

Probably a better view than what Mia Garland was getting right now.

1965

"Marti, you gotta do this one thing for me."

"Lie to mom and dad, they'll find out and freak. Worse, I'll have my ass chewed out for hurting their baby."

Oh.

"That's not funny." It hurt to hear it. Mia reeled back quick.

"Nothing about this is funny."

"It's only a couple weeks." Lucy begged, fingers clasped. "Tell them I'm with you. I'm training for work. Having a vacation after school because this is as far as I'm allowed to go. I need this. I need it."

"You want to go away and be a lab rat." Mia rubbed her face at the table. A spiced gingerbread scent bloomed from the oven behind her. Something for a hospital bake sale.

"They said I could change things. Me." *He said I was special. Me.*

"Mom will know."

"I can't stay in that house, Mia, I'm drowning there. I have this all worked out. Brenner said they'd cover my shots for the full duration. You know how much money that alone will save us?" Lucy grasped

her hands. "Do this for me, please."

"When they find out, it's your ass."

"I'll have money." Lucy reasoned.

"Mom and dad don't care about money, they care about *you*." Mia sat back. Eyes averting. *More than me*.

"You don't understand what it's like. I'm ruining them."

A beat.

"Maybe I don't." Mia sighed, came forward. "Can you call at least?"

"Brenner said that I could. At night."

"Brenner this and that, jeez, you sound like you have a school girl crush on the guy."

"He...cares about me." Lucy couldn't describe it. Brown eyes alight. "He wants to help me."

"This sounds like some hippie bullshit."

"It's a government sanctioned study. This is big. I already signed, I'm going. I'm not sitting in that house destroying mom and dad for another moment. I'm not suffocating myself anymore. I want to live. I just want to live. Please. This is my chance."

Mia softened.

"I'll lie. But, if they find out, I'm not covering."

"Thank you." Lucy came closer to hug her. "I mean it, this could change my life."

Her sister said nothing. Just held Lucy close.

She wasn't wrong about that part.

** ** *

"Dr. Myers." A nervous teen stood at full attention. He smiled. Dazzling. "Hello, again."

"I suppose it's Logan now. Lucy Garland. This way." He greeted her. "I'm one of the leading psychoanalysts if you will. We'll be getting to know each other."

Myers led her deep into the bowels of Hawkins Lab. They took her bag and clipped a badge to her shirt with her birthday on it. Numbers and dashes. No name.

They came upon a room full of tanks. Metal and glass observatories. Cots. Desks. Scientists all around rushing. A small group of civilians lined up. Normal, unimpressive folk like her.

"Don't be shy, down the steps." He pressed her back to make her go. Palm warm against fabric. "Stand with the others."

"Here?" She turned and he was already gone in the crowds. Lucy's eyes darted like a little bird. Arms crossing to hold herself. Thought of the last thing she said to Mia.

"See you soon, everything will be better after this. I promise."

"Don't be nervous," an older woman spoke to her right. Bright red hair. Wrinkles around green eyes. "They tell me we're fighting the bad guys."

"Bad guys?"

"Just an expression... Only seventeen? Youngest one in this lot."

"Lucy."

"I'm Kristen." They shook hands. Lucy eyed the group behind her. Boys and girls of all sizes and ages. All a little worn looking too like her. "College student?"

"I will be soon." Lucy smiled to herself like she was dreaming. Of a full orchestra carrying her into a field of forget-me-nots. Of a room filled with smiling faces happy to see her. Things like control and regulation were so far behind. "You?"

“I teach piano two towns over.”

“Oh, I play too. I plan to go to school for it. We have this old one in our house. It was our grandmother’s from when she was a little girl. Pristine condition.”

“Happy to hear that, take care of it. Things like music and the arts, they let us know we’re free.”

“How’s that?” Lucy stopped when a voice called.

“Straight line now!” A hulking scientist carrying a clipboard prodded at a man down the way with his pen. “You’ve all agreed to a study that’ll change the course of history. Stand tall. Feet apart.” Scientists flocked to question subjects. A younger man with a pointed face like a raven approached Lucy. Badge caught the lights.

“Doctor Creed,” she blinked at piercing blue eyes.

“You can call me Nolan. Not so much a doctor just yet, only an assistant. I’ve been assigned to you. Take an easier breath, I imagine this is overwhelming. We’re starting soon.” His lips curled at her. “Lucy?”

“Yes.”

“Pretty name for a pretty girl.” He looked up beyond her. At the men in suits behind glass. Brenner nodding at him. Lucy saw clothing being shed and quickly looked at her shoes. Mia’s saddle shoes. Made her feel like a little girl here.

“Clothing off, quickly now. Get into the assigned gowns.” The bigger man down the way called.

“Uh...here?” Lucy whispered. Hands on her baggy sweater.

“I’m afraid so. They’re just bodies.” Nolan said blankly. The huge scientist caught Lucy’s reluctance.

“I said, quickly.” He stood over her. A scar down the side of his face. Cropped hair that thinned. Sturdy for a man in a lab coat with grey eyes.

“She’s only seventeen, Dr. Barker.” Nolan reasoned, all ocean eyes and pitch dark locks, styled neatly.

Everyone else was silent and holding themselves. Nude bodies huddling when gowns were passed. Lucy gripped her collar and hesitated before a fist shot out to grip fabric, stretching. No one moved to stop it. The subjects cowered like they were afraid to.

“She’s a kid!” Kristen called, gown pressed to her chest. One of her breasts was missing, replaced with a jagged scar. Lucy only cried out in shock after being grabbed.

“Are you disobeying a direct order, little girl?” His breath spread hot and rank in her face. Coffee. Nolan set a hand on Barker’s shoulder when Lucy gave a whimper in the struggle.

“Please-!”

“That is quite enough!” Brenner appeared from thin air on the metal steps. High above them all. A silence followed him into rooms. “We’re not to handle our guests in such a distasteful way. Dr. Barker, see yourself into another room.”

“Yes, sir, Dr. Brenner.” Gone in a flash. Lucy hunched there. Missed the way Brenner nodded as if Barker had done something right. Made him the hero.

“Do not be nervous, I said I would oversee you personally.” Brenner removed his own coat. Held it up around her. A white knight. Nolan looked aside. “Now...undress.”

Lucy stared at him.

“You’re safe here.” He finished. “With me.”

Nolan unpacked a pair of wool socks and a hospital gown behind him. Lucy looked into Brenner’s eyes and smelled *Colonia*. He only watched her expression. Shielded her when clothing slipped away.

He wasn’t the first man to see her nude. Few fumbling teens in secret in high school got there first. Her mother would just die over this. She breathed all shaky and let Nolan settle the gown over her

arms. Socks pulled up to her knees.

“There. Very good. Now. Wait for further instruction, Lucy.” Brenner moved to go back up.

“Thank you,” hands tucked to her chest, “Martin.” The utter of his name stopped him. Head turned to smile at her before leaving.

Not everyone agreed with the special treatment. Dr. Barker glared behind a glass window.

Subjects were split up. Kristen smiled as she was led into another room. Lucy had this sinking feeling she wouldn't be seeing her ever again. Caught the flash of a ring on Kristen's elegant digit. An iridescent opal gemstone on her middle finger.

“Sit here. On the table.” Nolan patted a padded cot. They kept a few subjects in this main room. Split by machines and sheets curtained around. “When was your last period?”

“I haven't really had one since I was fifteen.” Lucy replied. He scanned a chart. “Meds, stress, and a strict diet made them all funny. I spotted about a week ago.”

“Insulin. Two shots. We'll ensure you get those. If you feel light headed, you're to inform either Dr. Brenner or myself. He insisted you be watched closely.”

Lucy stared at the pipes along the high ceiling. Realized she'd traded smothering parents for men in lab coats with rubber fingers to poke.

“We're going to start you on a simple dose. See how you take it. I'm here to observe. To ensure you don't...go anywhere we cannot follow you.”

“Like...a bad trip?”

“You could say that.” Nolan settled rubber gloves on. A strand of dark hair fell into his eyes. He was handsome in a hard sort of way. Hand selected by Brenner for Lucy. “Open your mouth.” A clear, green tab was upon his gloved pointer finger. Lucy lifted her eyes to

Brenner again. Back behind a wall of glass. Watching her.

Lips opened to accept the treat.

It melted like battery fluid under her tongue.

“Lie back. Give it time.”

“Have you worked with Brenner long?”

“Few months.” He went to sit at a makeshift desk with his papers spread out.

“Do you like it here?”

“The work? Yes, I suppose. It’s very dull work.”

“I like dull work,” she said quieter, “long as I’m not stuck at home.”

“Helicopter parents, I imagine. My aunt was diabetic.” *Was*, Lucy noted.

“They’re good, my mom and dad. Always know what’s best even if I don’t agree.”

Nolan stood up.

“Lucky girl.” He brought a machine closer and stuck patches to her torso, made notes, and removed them. Lucy heard fans and chatter beyond the sheets. Dark green in color with a swirling white pattern. “Cold?”

“Fine.” She swallowed and waited for something extraordinary to happen. The only tales of psychedelics came from bragging kids at school. It was thirty or so minutes of a pen scratching and men talking behind the curtains. Brenner up there with more suits sharing some brandy. His lips moving slowly. She wondered what he was saying.

“How to you feel?” Nolan spoke without looking up. Lucy sat forward, head cocked.

“Nothing. It’s not working.” She said. Breathing in. Out. Slow and steady. The curtain shifted when a body passed it.

And then the world unraveled.

White patterns came alive before her eyes. Swirling and hypnotic.

She giggled and sunk.

“It’s dancing.” Lucy wavered there and Nolan stood. Black pupils spread wide when he cupped her jaw to study it. The lines of him pulsed and shifted. She felt around his arms, gaze darting.

“Try to breathe even, I imagine it’s startling. The first time.” He offered slower. Many times would follow. A swirling cocktail to come for her.

“Is this what the world looks like to the insane? Do they see things as they are? Brains are so powerful, they fool us when they function. I wouldn’t know much about functioning though.” Lucy cackled there. A sound that thrilled. Made Brenner smile as he looked down.

“Stay close.” Nolan released her to go to his files. She felt along the curtains. Tried to catch the moving patterns. Swayed with them.

A sky unfurled before her. Like the paintings her mother studied. Brush strokes that came to life.

“I can see the walls breathing.” Lucy observed a while later. Doctors watched her explore some. Touch every little texture. Feeling the tanks to see water bubble up the window. “When do I get to swim?”

“Tomorrow.” Nolan offered as she went, caught in something far sweeter. A hand shot out to grasp the back of a lab coat. Logan turned to see her, setting his clipboard aside. Tone changed. “Doctor, I think the room is digesting me.”

“Do you, Lucy?” He fixed his glasses when Nolan came to tug her away.

“Yes, this place,” she whispered, “it’s digesting all of us.”

“Sorry, sir.” Mr. Creed brought her back

“No, I’m very interested in her manifesto. Go on.” Logan only smiled. Charmed. At her way of grace. Petals budding in full bloom under a nurturing sun she created herself. Because she had no choice.

“People never hear what I want to say and here you are lined up for little, old me.” She laughed again. Blushing. Feeling for Logan’s lab coat and getting far too close. Inhaling. “You’re pretty.”

That made him almost bashful, eyes flicking aside because it was odd. She was strange and it drew people when she unfurled. They wondered what color her petals would be. Dr. Myers let himself respond and then she pierced him with sweet, prickling thorns.

“You smell like...like amber and peaches.”

Something dawned on his face. A funny sort of recollection. Hands coiled around her wrists. The skin heated upon contact. Nolan inhaled and got nothing Lucy did.

“It’s a safe smell. Comforting. Like a warm bath full of bubbles. Do you feel it too? Doesn’t it make you want to sink?”

“My...my mother used to wear amber perfume. We always made Georgia spiced peaches together when I was younger. Having a bad day. Made the entire house smell-”

“Safe. Comforted.” Lucy’s eyebrows lifted. “How nostalgic.” Her nose burrowed into his chest. Felt the expensive cashmere sweater under his lab coat.

“Yes, I suppose so...” Dr. Myers trailed off, blinking with an odd sort of scoff. Lungs hitching.

“There’s something...acidic under the peaches. Not spicy. It’s like licking a battery.” Saliva pooled under her tongue. “You’ve already been digested, haven’t you, doctor?”

Her hands slipped around his neck, under the collar of his coat. Logan seemed enthralled. Lost. Not denying it.

“Why do you say that?” He asked.

“You’re so many colors and scents. They’re all fighting. My cells are fighting each other too, you know. Trying to eat me from the inside out. It’s a chore. Functioning.” Lucy must have struck something long buried and deep because his eyes glinted. A muscle tensed up in his jaw. Hands gently eased the girl off him. She swayed with huge eyes of wonder. Blown pupils.

Lips parted to breathe and Dr. Myers exhaled her out. This girl. This mythical siren they’d pulled ashore to prod and study.

“Kinda feel like I can fly about now.” Lucy reeled back when Nolan tugged at her. Hands slipped away from the man before her.

They got her to sit on a table. Her head drew back to breathe deep and even.

“Lucy. Why do you think this place is digesting us?” Logan came to her with genuine interest, adjusting his glasses.

“I can hear it.” Tone lowering, her lips parted to sigh. “I see the walls breathing. If we’re too loud and not still enough, it’ll do it faster.” Arms lifted idly, fingers shifting like she were hitting notes upon the air. She tried to become one with this place. This massive stomach.

They prodded more at her. Listened to her chatter.

About the colors. About how she was a color too. Rich. Pulsing. About how she wished she were red, but she was likely a soft lavender or a sea foam green. Her heart became a flashing neon sign. Bright and rosy.

Lucy ruffled her hair. Thought about how her psyche was spilling out. She slipped into it. A warm bath with smelling salts and miles of steam.

Tried to pull it back. Reel it in.

“If I can’t hold it back, I’ll flood. I have to keep building dimensions big enough for my psyche to fit. The colors keep rising. I can’t stop

them. They're in everything and they have a scent. Each one." She arched to feel a beat within her soul. Men and women seemed intrigued by the girl, already responsive to what would awaken inside her. "And if I can't build these dimensions one atop the other, then it'll all let go and that...that is insanity. I found the line. I feel like I could tightrope walk across it. I always liked the circus, you know."

"Put her in the tank." Brenner appeared behind the group. Hands clasped. Amused. Intent.

"Already?" Nolan began. "But, you said-"

"Do it now."

They whisked Lucy away. Men with concealed guns gripped her arms.

"Dr. Brenner, I don't think it's wise to shove her into-"

"Myers, you're still new to our operation. I imagine you're full of questions," Brenner turned his head, "but, don't put them in my direction again. This girl. She's different from the others. You'll see."

"She's a child." A woman crossed her arms, dressed in a beige blouse and blue slacks. Blonde hair styled carefully.

"Connie, trust me. This one is special. You heard what she said. Just as I predicted."

"Rambling teen having a good trip."

"What's that?" Lucy resisted when they tugged her gown off. Covered her breasts. A tanned suit was fitted over her body. Zipping up the front. A scuba suit. "What is it?"

"To let you breathe." Nolan settled a helmet over her after they outfitted her with wires. "Up the steps." Lucy wobbled and gripped the rail until her knuckles paled. Barker approached to see her.

"We're swimming? Is it tomorrow already?"

“Yes, dear. Stand on the bar.” Brenner neared behind them. “It’s alright.”

“I...” Lucy saw the water glitter before her. Her psyche pooling. Something she didn’t want to submerge herself in further. “No...no, I can’t. It’s gonna get out!” Nolan had a hand wrapped around her elbow. She shook her head. Tried to pull the helmet off.

Brenner gave one nod behind Lucy before Barker hurried up the metal steps, grabbed her shoulders to force her in with one hard shove. No one heard the scream because the door slapped shut. Bubbles erupted. Lucy flailed around there, found the window to beat on it.

Many voices overlapped. None she recognized. All distant echoes.

“Give her a second.” Brenner put one hand up. Lucy banged at them. Nolan stared with a harder expression. Connie with her hand on Logan’s chest, lips moving like she might be talking him down. Martin came to the glass and put one palm against Lucy’s own, smiling pleasantly with a nod. The younger girl stilled at him.

“I don’t want this.” A breathy gasp into her helmet. “Please.”

The window slid shut. Darkness overlapped around her. Shutting out sound, sight, and smell. Her senses cut off. The water sloshed and didn’t feel real. Like she was floating in space. Chest shaking as she tried to come down from the panic, Lucy kicked her legs. Felt around with no avail.

The darkness chilled her bones. Felt like she wasn’t alone in it. Like eels were slithering all over her body. Swarming and sparking. Caresses against flesh.

Lucy floated there in space. Reached out for nothing to reach back. A night sky with no stars. No planets. None to keep her company. Just nothing.

“Am I dead?”

This had to be close. Just a big, wide nothing.

And then she feared perhaps something would reach back. A great unknown.

Her psyche crackled. Unfurled. The dimensions crumbled to pieces. Insanity gripped as she shook and tried to breathe because she could do nothing else. Clawing and flailing.

Lucy dipped into a sunken place. A bridge between light and color. Life and death. Heaven and hell. Trapped still in flesh and bone. The only things keeping her grounded.

She pictured herself on a great cliff above the quarry. Smelling the trees and dirt. Her hair growing long into the wind and illuminated with stars. Memories.

Being trapped in her skin. In her house. With imperfect parents who still loved her so much. With an amazing sister who did everything to not resent her. She thought of Jim Hopper smiling in his uniform after seeing war. Smiling like he didn't know what burnt flesh smelled like. Beaming to see her glow back into him because he was still good. Still hopeful. For now.

"Martin, please!" Lucy found her voice and rattled. How long had it been? Minutes? Hours?

Her trip never seemed to end. Even tired, her brain was so active, she couldn't hope to sleep there. Tiny elves taking chisels to her brain. Click. Click. Click.

She stopped crying. Laughed instead. Quieted.

Lucy floated there aimlessly. Kept almost falling asleep. On the edge of the quarry. One trip and she jerked back awake. Suspended in that torment. Another damn routine.

Her foot falling through dead air because she thought there was one more step.

And then the darkness came apart. Still in the tank with no end. Her psyche adapted. Made colors dance again.

Was she dreaming now? Of music and neon lights. The fair where

she climbed her last tree. Where her organs threatened to cease functioning unless she developed a fear for the world itself. She saw the cells of her body attacking each other, just because it was wired to. Thought of how easy it would be for her to rot.

The suits here would certainly let her rot. Only after her juice is drained.

“Lucy?” A voice coaxed. *Colonia* wafted.

“Dad?” Eyes cracked and Brenner beamed down at her. Another trick. Jilted, she gasped and couldn’t move her limbs. “What happened?”

“You passed out, dear. Long trip. Informative. Day two.”

“Two?” She felt she’d been here weeks. A white room and bed greeted her. Leather straps around her wrists and ankles.

“You were frantic when they pulled you out. Hurt yourself. Had to be sedated. Not to worry, we fed you well. Gave you a shot. You were out of it. Slept soundly after. Morning shot and breakfast?”

“I can give myself the shot.”

“Nonsense, you have us now. You have me.” Brenner released her. Let her sit up. Water sloshed when a glass was forced to sputtering lips. Something in it made her mellow out as Martin cupped the back of her head. "There, there."

Lucy hissed and touched her elbow, purple with a blooming bruise. She remembered being yanked out of the tank now. Barker growling at her as Nolan stayed silent. Hitting her arm on the bar and a needle in her neck. Another needle plucked at her stomach as she floated there.

“Can I call my mother?” She asked like a child.

“Later. You’re in no state.” Brenner opened two sugar packets and stirred them into some blueberry oatmeal. “Open.” She did so obediently. Let him feed her a bowl. “Good girl. You have a full day ahead of you. You’re doing so well. I’m proud of you.”

Lucy almost forgot the day before with that alone. Him cupping her face and nodding with intent eyes. Brenner with his hands and his cologne. Making her purr. Tracing the line of her cheek.

“I got this. For you. Something to make you stand out with that dreary gown. Do you like it?” Red fabric. A tight knit cardigan. Soft and expensive. New. Not a hand-me-down.

Lucy bit her lip and touched it. Smiled. A man in power giving her a pretty gift.

“Yes. I like it. It’s mine?”

“Yes, of course. All yours. You earned a treat.” He helped her into it.

“Thank you.” Lucy tucked her hair aside, pulled her arms close to admire the burst of color against her skin.

“You’re very welcome. Come now.” Martin let her hold his arm as they left the room. Patted her hand. A mild headache pulsed while they went. Pressure left her from the trip, made her glide. She felt static and billowing somehow. Like fine silk. Charged next to him because he made her feel important.

Sock covered feet stumbled after him. They let her shower and gave her another dress. An actual dress, not some hospital gown. Simple and white under the buzz of candy red. She felt she was in uniform.

Martin led her back to the main room. No sheets or cots. Lucy wondered what they had other subjects doing now. Lost and misplaced beneath the lab.

“Yesterday, you said you smelled something.” Brenner began, seating Lucy at a single chair by a desk covered in files. Few scientists wandered. Connie watched from the doorway with her usual frozen scowl. Pursed lips that must have been tired. “Something we didn’t sense. Can you do it without the drugs, I wonder?”

“It was a trip, I said a lot of things I think.”

“Just a push in the right direction to explore yourself. And we

found something. Something that I plan to see again and again.” Brenner leaned on a table across from her. Both hands braced into it. “There are many ways to push someone, Lucy. Emotions are fickle and unavoidable. Bodies and brains work hard to survive even if it means attacking itself. Adapting. Altering your reality. Can you trust me?”

Lucy welled. He held her so tight standing feet away.

“Yes.” She crushed the word because she couldn’t stop it. Brenner saw her. Positioned her limbs just so like a puppet upon a bright stage. A mannequin in a store window. She thought about sitting on his knee and letting his cool voice out her lungs.

“To explore yourself, Lucy, we need you to be immersed. To relearn this like a sixth sense. Navigating this world in a whole new light so it’s second nature. What was it you smelled on our friend when you got near him. Dr. Myers. Nice guy, is he not? Seems to like you.”

“Peaches. Amber. Something warm.”

“Yes, but you said it was safety and comfort. Feelings. Emotions. That’s what you smelled, Lucy, because they ran hot in him. Pretty little dreamer reminded him of home. He released a sort of pheromone. And *you* felt it. Only you. Because you’re special.” Martin came forward, pointed his finger at her chest. “Your mother has a taste for this too and she gifted you with something extraordinary.” One tap to her nose sent more rose petals into cheeks. “You are extraordinary.”

“I’m...” Lucy trailed off, shook her head. Enthralled.

“No, none of that. You’re going to smile now and be happy because you are a point at which this world turns. Do not ever think less. I’ll be very unhappy if you do. Do you want me to be unhappy with you?” Brenner leaned into her space. One hand on the back of her chair.

“No.”

“Then, smile, because you’re pretty and you’re going to change

everything.” *For me.*

A smile twitched at his order. Him telling a girl who could smell emotions how to feel.

Lucy almost felt a hand coiling around her throat. She blinked and it was over. He stood taller.

“You’re so shy, Lucy. I am shy too.”

“You’re not shy.” She pulled at her cardigan and he chuckled with ease. Became her friend.

“No, I assure you, I am incredibly shy. But, this is something I overcome to get my work done. You’re pretty and you sway and blush. You can do all of that. It’s coveted. But, from here on, you’re going to own who you are. Your new path demands it. You’re going to be a proper lady. Stand tall. Clear voice. All the mumbling. The hesitation. It ends right now. Do you understand me?”

Lucy had to not shrink away. To look directly at him and speak openly.

“Yes.”

“Hm?”

“Yes, Martin, I understand.”

“I’m going to make you better. You want to be better, don’t you? That starts with what people see first. You fidgeting your hands. Hunched shoulders. Shuffling. No more. You’re not a child.”

I made you a woman.

“Yes,” she spoke, “I want to be better.”

Remembered a courtesy.

“Thank you.”

“Very good. That’s better.” Martin smiled. “I just look at you and

see a great deal of potential, Lucy. I care deeply, that's why I push you. Your parents didn't push you and that fear...it hurt you. It wounded you. Didn't it?"

"They love me." She breathed, stilling at his fixed eyes because they were warning.

"Are you happy with yourself? With that home? Do you even feel alive, Lucy?" Brenner scoffed because he nailed her heart. She almost welled to cry right there. "They love you, I'm sure, and they hold you back. They don't understand you, dear. Not like I do. That's what I'm trying to say. It's frustrating to see you so wounded and oblivious. It hurts me too. You don't want to see me harmed, do you?" His talons latched into tender flesh.

"No. Not at all." Hands pulled for his shirt in a fit of desperation. "They don't...want me to be hurt either." She reasoned. Weakened.

"Sometimes you have to hurt." Brenner flocked forward. Took her chin between two fingers. "You have to bleed. And scar. And let your skin toughen. They did you no favors. So, I'm going to push you. My special girl. Because I know you can do it. I want to nurture it, but that starts with you caring for yourself. I need you to believe more than I. Can you promise me you'll do that?"

Lucy felt again she had no choice.

"I promise." Hands folded in her lap and she sat up for him. Chin higher.

"No hiding from this. What it becomes. You're going to explore it. Every inch, until you know it by heart. Until it's an old lover." He knelt down before Lucy. One hand came to her knee. Close as if they were the only two souls in this massive room. "When you understand these...sensations. The language of emotions. The scent of each one as the world brings them to you. I think you'll be able to put them back out. Think of honeybees in a hive. Lost without the queen to guide them."

"You...You think I-?"

“Science is all observation and trial. Repetition.” Martin ghosted a smirk. “You’ll learn to recognize emotions when you pair them with scent. To do that, we have to push them toward you.” His finger drew a small circle into the fabric of her dress when he looked down at her clasped hands. “We push your body and mind to sense them in waves. To adapt. To protect itself and I think something will shove right back. You may not understand everything that happens to you. These short weeks we have together. But, know that I’m always going to have your best interest at heart. I promise you, Lucy.”

And then Brenner did something strange. He took her hand. Settled the palm against his chest.

Lucy smelt nothing from him. Only his empty cologne that now confused her. Made her shrink into a small box. His influence kept her from invading him.

Martin could have smiled and admitted, *I wear it for you, my dear.*

Owned the fact that he was a marvelous hunter disguising his scent against doe-eyed prey.

But, he only beamed. Let Lucy take his hand and put it right back upon her heart. Trembling. His own pulse picked up a harder beat. He had her.

“I want to be better,” she insisted, “I want...influence. I want to stop being afraid of everything, Martin, and feel alive and beautiful and wanted. And *something*. Anything.”

Lucy let it dawn upon her brown eyes. Glinting. Found one powerful sentiment that thrilled bone marrow.

“I want to push back.”

Against a world that shoved her down to her knees. Against taunts and sneers. Against the visibility and agency ripped away from her.

Brenner stood up. Offered his arm again as any gentleman would. She took it with eyes full of admiration. Under his spell and gentle coaxing.

Willing in her soul and flesh at last.

“Now, certain emotions will definitely come easier than others. We’ll start with some of the more...straightforward points. But, first, something to help you loosen those stitches.” He met Nolan at a table.

“It’s ready, Dr. Brenner.”

“Drink this.”

“What’s in it?” Lucy took it with both hands either way.

“A girl who trusts me won’t question the unimportant.” Martin noted. She caught his eyes and gulped the chemicals in one swig to please him. “This way. Let it take effect. Should be quicker than yesterday.” All soft again, he led her by the arm. Back to her room. “Sit on the bed, Lucy.”

She did so without blinking.

“Mr. Creed, can you bring our guest in?” Brenner fixed his tie when they were left alone, eyed her head lulling. “How is it?”

“Feels like the floor is slanting.”

“You won’t have to stand, not to worry. I just need you to witness something. It’s important and you won’t look away.”

She leaned on one arm, fiddling with a leather strap hanging down the side of her bed. Fingers smoothing the texture of it. The room began to come apart. Brenner stood static and outlines of him snapped. Circled like a kaleidoscope.

“How many fingers do you see?” He’d asked.

“Ah...” Lucy’s eyes fluttered. Tongue darting out along the swell of pink lips. “Three hands. Three...nine?”

“Close enough.” Martin looked up when Nolan led a small group inside her cage. Barker among them. He drew behind Lucy and grasped her arms. Earned a whimper when fingers dug into biceps.

She kicked around, squirming feebly. "Lucy, be still. It's alright."

She sighed back into Dr. Barker's massive chest. Stiff as can be.

"Don't move." He hissed into her ear, shaking her up some.

"Sir?" A blonde came out from behind Nolan. Slender and short.
"Dr. Brenner?"

"Lucy, this is Dahlia Cross. A nurse here for about...how long now?"

"About eight months, doctor." The woman's blue eyes shifted around. Peered toward the door.

"Eight months. Yes. Creeping up on a year. And we've appreciated a competent sent of hands. Dr. Barker, if you would?"

Lucy was jerked into the bed. Rough hands forced her wrists back. Leather bound them.

"Let me go!" She bucked around. Twisted in her drunken, altered state. She and the woman just stared. Mice headed into an electric fence. The door opened and Connie appeared. Something was different this hour.

She was smiling.

"Connie, finally." Martin pulled a file from her, opened it to scan. Cool and casual. "You have it. Good, good. They made quick work."

"Hold still." Barker pressed both palms into Lucy's shoulders until her face mashed the bed. Shaken and crying already, broken little sounds.

"You're hurting her." Nolan yanked him off and brought Lucy up, hooking his arms under her own. Brenner eyed the handler with a nod. Her forehead touched the cool plaster of the wall.

"I don't understand." She said.

"Dr. Brenner, why am I here?" Dahlia had asked, touching her

buttercream hair. Styled and short with a curl at the ends. Martin seemed to forget her, grinned like it was an apology.

“You live in the city currently, do you not?” He passed the file to a smirking Connie and came to the nurse. Barker at his side to close in. “Amity Lane. Little flat with blue shutters.”

The woman blanched there. Sunk back into the wall.

“A boyfriend too. Jessie Walsh. Handsome fellow. Isn’t that right, Dahlia?”

“...That’s correct.”

“Very good. Barker?”

Lucy jilted when a hard rap dented the wall. A blonde head bounced so hard, blood spat out her lips and nose to speckle the pristine white there near the crack. Barker’s fist broke teeth.

Dahlia didn’t wail. Seemed like she couldn’t. Only made this whimpering moan. A crackle as if she couldn’t catch her breath back when she slid down. Nolan had one arm around Lucy still. Holding her up.

Poor Dahlia couldn’t scream, Lucy realized, no voice came.

But, Lucy could. So, she did for her.

“Stop... Stop! What’s happening? Oh, god! Stop it!” Lucy was petrified there still. Calling out in shock and horror.

“Lucy.” Brenner sighed like it annoyed him. “Be quiet. You’re not focused.”

Nolan was hushing her softly. Being a damn hero about it. Dahlia sat crumpled there against the wall. Tears leaking as she looked up and held her broken nose. Blood trickled an obscene, dreamy shade like it wasn’t real. Stripes of it over pale skin and white fabric. A candy cane.

“Ms. Cross is not who she appears to be.” Brenner continued.

Official and pressed. "You're not a nurse, are you?"

She made a bubbling gargle of a sound. A sob.

"Yes, that's right. You've been spying on our operation for months." He tutted, head shaking. "That's so unfortunate. Good help is hard to find, you know."

Lucy shut her eyes. Didn't want to see anymore. And then the scent wafted. Over the chemical cleanliness of the room. The moving kaleidoscope pictures painted all technicolor.

A tart smell. Fresh pie in a window. Hot raspberries. Plums. Roses even. So tart, it was almost sour. Like her taste buds the day she got sick. But, it was divine too. Something you didn't mind burning your tongue on for just one bite.

"Fear." Brenner said. "That's an easy emotion. Bring Lucy here."

"No, please!" Lucy sagged and wiggled in her bonds. Barker yanked Nolan off and had the back of her neck. Like she was a dog who'd had an accident.

"Look at her!" Barker pulled for black hair. Got her real close to Dahlia's pathetic whimpering. Her delirious head shaking because her skull must have cracked. It was why she couldn't scream. Couldn't sit herself upright. All she could do was let sticky blood pool into hot palms.

"No!" Lucy's knees jerked around. She saw thick blood the color of strawberry syrup dripping. A yellowed stain on the white nurse gown where Dahlia had wet herself. Both women looked at each other. Cried. Dahlia's lips parted and Lucy screamed again for her. Almost in a way of comfort and recognition.

"What's fear smell like Lucy?" Brenner asked coolly.

That was the worst part. How good it smelled. Lucy didn't catch the blood yet. The chemicals. The dull piss. She smelled something sweet and tart. And it made her mouth water.

Lucy was sputtering. Unable to speak clearly. Hyperventilated as all

the colors twisted and bloomed. Dahlia got some awareness back. Felt around and touched Lucy's leg in one cry for help.

"P-Please." A piece of tooth fell from her swollen mouth in a blubber of ruby spit.

"Lucy, you're not doing her any favors dragging this out." Martin offered then. "Fear."

"It..." Lucy gasped for watery air. Until it hurt. "It's like...pie. Strawberry rhubarb. Raspberry. It's tart. It's-"

"Tasty." Barker laughed loudly in her ear. Rasping and taunted. "Tasty, tasty, beautiful fear." He inhaled the scent of her hair to himself.

"Now. That was an easy one. How about this?" Brenner pulled a photo from the file. "Dahlia, your Jessie was not pleased with our intrusion to your lovely home." The picture flicked before her eyes. One that made her find a voice. A scream howled in Lucy's face. She closed her eyes again. Didn't see the photo.

Didn't need to.

And then she smelled the blood. Buckets of it until she gagged. Didn't throw up. Sadness. Metallic and mourning as her mother pointed out once so long ago.

"Blood." She scrunched her face before Brenner asked. "Blood! Rust! Blood!" Dripping down the back of her throat. Barker's hand still wedged into black locks. Twisting them around.

"Another simple one. Connie, I do hope you're taking notes." Martin scoffed.

Nolan stared aside behind them. Connie looked on next to Brenner, relished the scene as if she'd been exploring art in a museum.

Lucy screamed again when she was pulled back painfully. Dragged to the foot of the bed so she was out of the way. Dahlia sputtered and blinked. Squirmed like she might be trying to get up but her head was too heavy. Lucy felt that as well. A weight pulling her down.

One last scent pulled when her cheek touched the tile. When Connie loaded a bullet into a sleek revolver. A rotting squelch of decay and dead flesh. Over the blood and piping pie. Something Jim Hopper had smelled when he was whisked away to fight.

Rotting, burnt flesh.

Lucy opened her eyes. Saw the blonde looking back with a sick acceptance that this was the end.

Hopelessness.

It was one of the ugliest things in the world Lucy decided. Foul stench over so many others. It truly smelled like death.

A buttercream head bobbed when one shot fired. Vanilla icing locks turned all strawberry. Lucy opened her mouth like she might wail again. Lost the sound. She'd never seen a dead body in her life. Not even at her grandmother's funeral.

Dahlia looked as if she was still screaming there. Like it would never end. Eternal.

"Get it out of here. Clean this mess up." Brenner came toward Lucy when the door opened to let his people work. Cupped her face so she didn't see the woman being dragged out. "You did well. You understand why she had to go? She betrayed all of us. She had to be punished."

Lucy was shaking too hard for sound. Inconsolable. Her psyche cracked to pieces. Sound, scent, and color became one great sixth sense. Like a third eye opening. Blown pupils darted.

"She was bad, Lucy," he furrowed his brow. Did something cruel. Kissed her temple. "But, you're not bad. You're going to perfect under my guidance."

"I w-want to go home. *Please.*" Lucy had heaved at last with clumped, wet lashes. Saliva dripping and snotty as she cried so hard. Brenner hid his disgust, but she smelled that too. Gasoline. "I want my mom." A wail before a needle pricked her neck. Made her boneless.

“Oh, Lucy,” he let her slip into a dark pool, “you’re not going home. Haven’t you realized that yet, dear? You are hope for me and this festering world. Subject Zero. My Zero. Flung from space to answer my every prayer. I’ll be keeping you now.”

Darkness was a comfort.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for reading, more 1982 Jim in the next one, I really want to build her past up with Brenner and the lab. Kinda fun to use my past acid trip as reference lol

See you next time!

4. Little Stamp Collection

Notes for the Chapter:

More lab stuff in 1965, but we get some 1982 Jim as I bounce around. In all honesty, I wanted to push this chapter out before the new animal crossing comes out bc I'm about to be lost in that for a bit. 🐼🐼🐼

TW: Major abuse from Brenner/Hawkins Lab. Sexual exploitation. I'll keep putting warnings here. Light suicide mention.

1965

"Dr. Brenner, I don't understand," Nolan said over coffee that evening. Hawkins Lab break room. Where monsters ate donuts. Watched a beat up TV. Told jokes as if they weren't tormenting the sick and poor.

"You're not sure why I assigned you to Lucy, over the more experienced lot." Brenner didn't looked up. Arms crossed. No jacket or tie. Sleeves rolled up. "You're young, Mr. Creed. Willing to prove yourself. Clinical. I need heroes and villains in Lucy's orbit. You and Barker. It's quite simple."

"You want me to fuck her?"

"Don't be disgusting." Eyes snapped and made Nolan flush with embarrassment. "I want you to pat her head when the world closes in. When Barker roughs her up. When she's scared and alone, she needs people to trust. I cannot be the only one, I still have a lab to command. She won't always understand why I do what I do to her. So, I need another shoulder for her to weep upon. Be decent if you have such a dial."

They quieted as Logan entered the room.

"I'll be heading out," Brenner's tone changed, "loose end to tie up. Mr. Creed has the file and he'll see Lucy to your room for her session.

After her shot and dinner.”

“Of course.” Dr. Myers pulled the manila folder from Nolan’s fingers.
“Day two for her.”

“Be wary, Lucy’s been hysterical. Having nightmares from the trip today, she went to...a dark place. She might make up a story or two.”
Brenner adjusted his watch. Smiled.

“It’s my job to listen either way. I’d prefer it if my patients weren’t pumped full of drugs before I monitor them. Alters the sessions and won’t help your study in the long run.”

“Unfortunately, the world isn’t perfect, Dr. Myers. Take your notes and Mr. Creed will see the girl to bed. She has a big day ahead tomorrow.” Brenner left them.

“Hysterical, he said?”

“You’re the shrink.” Nolan shrugged, plucked up a pink donut, and left the room. Lucy woke to a tray being rolled over her. Curled on her side with a pounding, light head. “You need to eat.”

She eyed the wall. Nothing. No crack. No red. Like Dahlia Cross and her pretty buttercream hair didn’t even exist. She wondered about the last thing Dahlia had said to the man she loved. Hoped it was significant.

“You passed out after a session. You need to eat.” Nolan managed to plunge insulin into her. Pulled her up. TV dinner with half a pink donut on the side. A personal touch. “Smuggled you something sweet. Tests show you’re riding a little low. Eat it all.”

“Dahlia?”

“Who’s Dahlia?”

Brown eyes lifted to him.

“She...She was...”

A shot echoed through Lucy’s brain. Vibrated synapses apart.

“Do you like dahlias? The flower?” He sat upon her bed and tucked a napkin into her gown.

“My mother grows them in front of our house.” She blinked. Was it real? She remembered the scent. The exact scene slipped away. “All colors. But, the red ones are my favorite.” Nolan unwrapped her silverware. Put a fork into her hand.

“You’re going to speak to a psychologist after this. Something recommended for the study to...help you process. Helps us understand too.” Nolan began. “I realize these drugs are bringing certain things up. Saying the incorrect thing to these people...might raise a red flag.”

“Can I call my sister?” Lucy poked at her food. Started to fork it down. Bland along a pink tongue.

“I’m not supposed to. The phone, Lucy, they listen in. If you were to say something-”

“I’ll be good. I just want to tell her I’m okay.” Lucy begged this time. Grasped his wrist. Nolan pulled like he might rip away. But, stayed put. Patted her fingers before he brightened. “She’ll worry and then my parents will ask questions. I...”

“You can tell me anything, Lucy, and I’ll see about a phone call.”

Desperation gripped.

“I lied when I came here.”

“Lied how?”

“My sister covered. They think I’m training for some new job, staying with her. They’ll worry and they’ll look for me.”

“We certainly don’t want to frighten your parents. Eat.” Nolan stood up. “Lucky girl. Parents who worry so about you.”

Lucy didn’t reply, felt guilt swirl instead. Like maybe she shouldn’t have told him that.

The door shut.

** ** *

“Ms. Garland?” It was the second time he asked.

Lucy swayed in a plush chair. Head spinning as she came down from the glow. Caught a flutter of bright blonde hair out the corner of her eye that was gone when she looked.

Logan sat back and studied her. His office was a cramped space like they couldn't be bothered to make room for him. Grey walls. A pale blue tile and one ceiling fan.

“Lucy, where are you right now?”

“Still in this place.” She stared at his sweater. A deep burgundy color. “This place I signed up to be in because a man called me special and pretty and I still want to please him. I feel I'll just die if I don't. He made me promises and the sick part is I believe him even still. He's going to make me better. I think I'm supposed to feel worse before I'm better. And those people...they...oh, god...”

“Dr. Brenner?”

“I'm allowed to call him Martin.” Lucy pulled the red cardigan around herself. So far away from here. Bathing in the smell of fresh pie and blood. Gasoline and peaches. This new world she'd come to know. Brown eyes caught an orange pill bottle sitting on the table behind him. “What are those for?”

“They're...” Logan's demeanor jumped. A swipe and the bottle was in a drawer. “Just something for my headaches.” A quick rush of sour milk hushed because Lucy tuned into him. Logan fixed his glasses and tilted his head. Sour milk. Shame. Guilt. Insecurity. “I'd like to talk about you, Lucy.”

“Not used to that yet.” She paused. “Except my mother, I'm all she thinks about. If I were to shut my thumb into a drawer, every drawer in our house would be torn out. Once I cut myself badly on the little fence in front of my house. I was just playing around...and my dad ripped it out the next day.”

"You're the youngest, are you not?" He pushed his notes aside, hands clasped. "Being young and sick, parents can obsess over their children. They dream of making the world better for them, and any inkling they can't."

"Being here, I appreciate it now. I miss my mother. Her cinnamon hand lotion. Miss when my dad would come in from working on the car smelling of motor oil. We always appreciate things after they're gone."

"Experiments end."

Brown eyes lifted to invade blue ones.

"This one won't." Lucy's head cocked. She knew this well already. This black hole that sucked her in. "What's happening to the others?"

"Afraid I'm only here three times a week. I'm not involved in what goes on below, they brought me in to monitor."

"I don't think I should talk anymore about me."

"Why's that, Lucy?" He pulled his glasses off and perched them aside. She blinked.

"Does your mother still make you Georgia spiced peaches?"

He debated answering.

"She does. Not so much for me. Gives them out to neighbors. Sends a jar every Christmas."

"That's nice. I always love Christmas time."

"Tell me about that."

"My sister, Marti, and I...we would make these cinnamon gingerbread cookies every year." An amused scoff. "Dad always snuck a few too many until mom was smacking his hands away. And even I was allowed to have some small ones. No icing on mine though. But, that was fine. Made the whole house smell like heaven. Like spicy cinnamon all the way to New Years."

“Are you close to your sister?”

“Yes... Do you have a sibling, Dr. Myers?”

“Had a sibling.” He shouldn’t be telling her about him. It was wrong.
“Elder sister. Passed away.”

“Doesn’t that word just make you want to cry?” Lucy welled a little for him. Beyond tired. Eyes red rimmed. She sniffled and pressed her lips while holding herself.

“Which word?”

“*Had.*” Lucy sounded it out. “Had. Almost. Maybe. We had something once that we cherished and now we don’t.” She rubbed her knee through fabric, wincing. Logan’s eyes dropped. Such a lady.

“Go ahead and scratch.” He peered back up at her eyes.

Lucy scoffed, tucked fingers under her dress to scratch her thigh and smoothed it back down.

“Where is your sister now? Still in Hawkins?”

“Outskirts. She’s happier moved away.”

“How so?”

“She doesn’t have to hear about my issues anymore. Mia doesn’t say anything really, but I bet she thinks it.” Lucy’s fingers curled in her lap when she looked down at them. Squeezed her eyes shut. This man was blissful and ignorant. He didn’t hear gunshots rattling his brain. Maybe that wasn’t a fair judgement. “Why’d you lie earlier?”

“Lie?”

“I smelled it.”

“Smelled the lie?”

“No, I smelled your shame from it. Or guilt. Either way they curdle like sour milk. When you open your fridge and know something’s

gone bad, but you can't exactly tell what." Lucy touched a finger to her lips. Still looked so distant like she was floating in a tank.

"Do you often do this?"

"Smell emotions, doctor? No, I just started." It was a joke, but neither laughed.

"Deflect when a spotlight is on you." Logan finished. Goosebumps rose on her arms.

"Maybe I don't trust you." She hugged herself, tried to look smaller. "How can I?" Lucy wondered what trust smelled like.

"That's fair. I was there if you recall. The tank. I'd like to understand what goes on below, Lucy. And I'd like to understand how you feel."

"You won't." She replied softer. "You have to see it. See what goes on below. What do they say to you? The others? Did you talk to Kristen? She plays piano like I do. Where is she?"

"Lucy." Logan swallowed. "I haven't spoken to all of them and I'm sorry to say, you're the most coherent of them. Right now you're my window into what goes on and how it makes you feel."

This spark went through her body. The others weren't special. Not like her.

They'd be drooling and drained of their juice quick. Turned to mush. Tossed out for new models.

Lucy hadn't realized she was crying until he came around with a tissue between two fingers. She took it. Sniffled and wiped her eyes. Watched him lean there before her in front of his desk.

"I don't think I'm supposed to be here anymore." She shuddered. Voice lowering. "They killed her."

"Who?"

"They covered it up. I think they cover things up. We're all digested here and they'll cover it up." Lucy's breathing sped. She met Logan's

eyes. Cracked. A cry for help. "They're lying to you."

"What?"

"Because they have to lie and you have to write a report that helps them." Lucy swallowed. She rubbed her elbow. Felt the still swollen bruise from day one pucker. "I-

The door rattled.

"Apologies, sir, she's wanted elsewhere. Doctor's orders." Barker was inside and grasping Lucy's arm. Pulling.

"We weren't done." Logan reached for Lucy's hand on instinct. Caught her.

"Don't let me go!" Panic gripped. "Don't let him take me away!" Lucy wiggled, grasped for as much of the doctor as she could. He seemed confused. Charged by the turn in here. The fact that these people *knew*. "They hurt us! I want to go home!"

"She's crazy, I got her!" Barker ripped her backwards. She tried to fight. Tried to save herself. Arms went tight around her waist. Undaunted when she kicked off the floor and drove her fists into muscle.

Scientists who saw them went the other way.

"You should have kept quiet, little one," he spat as they paced into a restricted area. Guards stopped Logan from pursing. He watched a glow frame Lucy from the next room. The door shut on it. "Now we have to peel you apart. Clip your wings."

They came upon the room with the tanks below. Lucy struggled and tried to pull at a bright yellow hand rail. Overlooking the atrium.

"Thought you were a nice girl, tragic that you took a bad tumble."

Lucy stopped fighting. Chest sinking when realization dawned as he held her above the stairs.

She likely smelled of death.

A breath pulled taut and didn't leave when she met the cold air. When Barker's arms left her. A series of clatters reverberated. Porcelain dishes crashing into the floor scored to screeching violin strings. Lucy's body hitting metal with dull thuds. Pain howled only at the bottom.

A haze of dots and stars. Something warm trickling out the side of her hairline. She managed to turn over at the sound of slow footsteps. Creeping up on her with a mighty shadow. Lucy crawled, dragged herself forth when her voice didn't come. Ears ringing.

"You can move your arms and legs still." He observed. Nudged her back with his foot. "Try wiggling those fingers for me." Barker laughed at her there sprawled and whimpering. "You probably taste like cherry pie."

Lucy screamed at last when a heel came down. Heard a crack of her arm popping.

The pain set her soul on fire. Became so great that her mind detached and darkness snapped the world shut.

** ** *

1982

It wasn't often Lucy left Hawkins. Not like she had the choice to. As long as she didn't stray too far, all would be well.

Next town over beyond the quarry and trees wasn't quite as wholesome as Hawkins, but silent enough about it. Lucy was too nice looking a woman to be pulling up to the brick building before her. Cutting the engine, she peered at the blocked out windows. The neon sign and ads plastered all over for drinks and shows.

A bar that managed to be upscale and seedy all at once. Slowly turned strip club with the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s. Only for the brave to enter considering the rough family that owned it. And that family dwindled to one member with the test of time and punishment.

Blue Velvet in curling cobalt neon. Family was a sucker for nostalgia

and the new owner decided not to change the name when it fell into his lap.

“Is he here?” Lucy greeted the bouncer at the door. Sawyer. Wrestler type with sunglasses and hair down to his pecs.

“At the bar, sugar.”

Lucy let the nickname slide because she liked him and the intent was different. Went inside. A strip club in daylight on a weekday was quite the dull affair. No one but the girl on stage. A bartender. Maybe a wandering waiter.

And an owner kicked back at a round table. One foot up on the seat as he watched with little interest, papers spread before him. Lights whirled around the dim space. Disco ball glittering. Stage lights pulled. Lucy glowed even still when they played off her frame and he jerked to sit up upon seeing her there.

“Lucy.” A hand swept blond hair, styled messy with purpose.

“Logan. Good to see you.” She smiled when he cocked his head to the bar, sauntered with her over to it. Dressed in jeans and tight, open shirts. No cashmere sweaters. Didn’t even wear his glasses out and about any longer.

“Rum and diet?”

“Small one, I can’t stay long.”

“You never do.” Logan ordered. “Two cherries still?”

“I suppose if you want to spoil me.”

“I always do.” They went back to the table. His legs spread when he plopped back down into the leather seats. Music played so she sat forward across from him. Hands clasping. They studied each other. Drinks were set down. Logan had a taste for whiskey these days.

Lucy whirled her straw. Sipped. Eyed the mauve print left there before she sighed.

“Leaving me in suspense?”

“Martin came for a visit this morning.”

“Morning, huh? Used to bug you at night.” The quip earned a flicker of her big eyes. His shoulders fell. “Sorry. More gifts from our doctor?”

“No, not today. It felt like he was warning me.”

“Warning you? His favorite subject.” Logan reached forth and took her hand. Pulled to expose a tattoo upon her wrist. Three tiny square zeros. Hidden under bracelets or a watch. Lucy felt his finger trace her veins and pulled back.

“Something is different. I don’t know.”

“Could it be because you’re rolling around with that Police Chief?” His head cocked. More sarcastic than he used to be. More lax and unworried too because his world closed in. “You *are* still rolling around with that Hopper guy, aren’t you?”

“No comment. I regret telling you that.”

His tongue clicked and a smile followed.

“You’re happier. It’s good.”

“Martin knows.” Lucy shrugged. “I can’t tell if he cares.”

“If he cared, we’d all be underwater, Lucy. Brenner has bigger fish to fry. As long as you’re playing into his best interest, you’re fine. That’s why you’re in that house and not a cell underground. He’s probably distracted. Times are changing. We’re all moving up in the world. Moving on.”

“Not me.”

“You like him. The Chief. He likes you. What’s not to like?”

“Jim is messy.” Addictions. Mood swings. Phases. Flaws and flaws. And he was also thoughtful and good underneath. Safe.

“You need messy.”

“Very funny.” She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know, I just...needed tell someone.”

“I’m glad to be on your mind.” He was genuine that time. Sitting back again. They both drank. “You warning me too? He might be on the prowl. He never speaks to me in person when he needs something. Don’t pretend you have social visits.”

“I socialized plenty.” Lucy sipped again and peered aside.

The girl on stage swaying slowly around a sleek pole. Little purple one piece cut high on her hips and low on her breasts. Cotton candy pink wig teased for the gods. *Barbie*. No one to dance for at the moment. She had this dreamy expression upon her face, Lucy wondered what was going on in her brain. Wondered if she smelled of cotton candy too.

“New girl?”

“Hm. Southern belle type.” He nodded, put his foot back up to relax. “You’re worried about me. Brenner hasn’t come for either of us. We played his game. Let him win. Kept playing. Living life and doing damn favors when he requires it.”

“Favors are getting bigger.”

“World’s getting bigger, darlin’.” He mocked a southern accent and pulled out a pill bottle to pop one. Seemed to still be helping him, although Lucy hadn’t known Logan before his prescriptions.

“He scared me.”

“He always has,” he said, eyes narrowing, “he just dressed it up better back then. Lucy, I’m telling you, you’re doing all you can. Brenner’s never been an easy man to please. If there was a problem, we wouldn’t be talking. You’re still his favorite. He still thinks he’s got his teeth gouged far enough into you and as long as he thinks that, you’re fine... Well, fine isn’t the right word. But, you catch my drift. Brenner will only act the second he believes you’re inching away. He visits and warns about that. Just a check in to make sure

you're his girl. It helps him sleep at night even if he won't admit it."

"Damn shrink."

"Hard thing to break."

She took a long drink. Drained the liquid around cool ice. Sighed out.

"She's pretty, the southern belle." Lucy stood up. Left her glass still perspiring there. "Take care of the girls, Logan."

His drink lifted to toast.

"You know I will. See you around, Lucy. Stay messy, it suits you."

Mauve lips quirked.

"Why aren't you worried?"

"Why would I be? They don't have on me what they do on you." He spun his straw around, flicked it aside to gulp. "Not a lot for me to lose. The experiment doesn't end."

"Brenner has a way of digging."

"Don't we know it." A sly look crossed, head tilting to look her up and down. "Guess, there's always one thing left. Something that keeps us going when everything else is burned. A shiny red thread. Hope it doesn't snap apart."

She stared. Thought she smelt Christmas cookies briefly when their intent eyes met. Warm and vaguely cinnamon. Something unmatched. Something she'd never been able to place emotionally.

"Bye." Lucy turned and made her way out, stopping to go to the woman on stage. Greens eyes glinted at her from behind fluffy, pink locks. She sank down to crawl and pout. Prowling when Lucy flicked a crisp twenty out between two fingers.

A smile crept. *Barbie* arched to take it, pecking those plum lips for good measure.

“Thanks, darlin’,” she purred, “come visit me again.”

She did smell like cotton candy. Lucy smiled to herself, tongued her mouth, and left as the dancer spun around her pole with more ardor. Logan scoffed and watched light frame Lucy’s body when it poured before the door shut.

He went back to his drink.

** ** *

1965

Lucy woke to *Colonia* again in the past. Cinnamon hand lotion.

Started to cry because she feared what used to bring comfort. One of the great evils Brenner instilled in her first. A lack of trust.

“Lucy.” That gasp stilled the world. Brown eyes snapped.

“Mom,” Lucy wiggled and felt the fire howl. Bone marrow steamed. Pain all along her left side. A strap across her shoulders, waist, and legs. Left arm in a cast. “Mom!”

“I’m here,” Olivia let Don hold her. They hovered. “We’re all here.”

“Lucy, I’m sorry.” Mia was there too. The room didn’t have the chemical twang of a hospital. Instead metallic blood dried upon the walls. Something else carried. Just as somber. A smell like it might rain soon.

“We’re here, sweetheart.” Donald smoothed her hair to kiss skin. Was it all a bad dream?

“What happened?” Lucy crackled and shook. The door opened and a man hurried in wearing full scrubs and a mask.

“Ms. Garland. Oh dear, let’s give you something for that pain.” Brenner brought the paper from his lips. Pricked her IV as she jerked.

It all flooded back when they locked eyes. His lips pressed.

“No...”

“Easy, there we are.” One hand touched her shoulder. “That’s a good girl.”

“No, no, no.” Lucy wiggled and became docile. Mumbled about colors and smells and dahlias. Olivia kissed her head.

“As I suspected. Poor girl. Her attempt shook all of us. I can’t tell you how sorry I am. How hard I tried to prevent it.” Brenner stared at her for a beat, turned to Olivia sniffing. “I can’t help but blame myself.”

“What did you do to my little girl?” Donald set his jaw.

“Our Lucy wouldn’t try to-”

“-kill herself.” Mia finished so her mother didn’t have too. She pushed her way between Brenner and her sister. Petting hair aside.

“Home.” Lucy wept and tried to thrash. “Home.”

“Mrs. Garland. I understand how difficult this is to face. Your daughter signed up for a study. Don’t let the rumors fool you, we have the upmost care with our volunteers.” He pressed that last word. Lucy signed her soul over. “We have plenty who can testify to that. I know there’s talk of drugs and mind games. Really it’s a sleep study, we have an experienced psychologist and staff. Your girl had demons. Guilt over her shortcomings. Her illness.”

“My daughter lives with her illness, she’s never been-”

“Sorry to say, we heard a different story. Lucy told us she lied to get out of that house. Did she not, Artemisia?” Martin addressed the older girl there glaring at him. “Cried about being smothered. Trapped. Guilted into causing so many issues for her poor family. Your girl put on such a brave face. Something to be admired. But, now she’s in a place where she can get help. Rest assured, Lucy will receive the care she needs here at no cost to you. It’s a new program, you see.”

Olivia inhaled. Wasn’t fooled by *Colonia*.

“She’s coming home with us.”

Brenner didn’t miss a beat. He’d hoped she’d give in. Mothers were always so troublesome. Fighting for their cubs. A sigh.

“I’m afraid that’s quite impossible. Your girl tried to kill herself. She’s a danger to herself and others. She’s already been accepted into the program. To make her well again.”

“We didn’t consent to that.” Donald piped forth. “You can’t keep our daughter.”

“It’s out of your hands. Your government and this hospital made the choice the second she broke down and threw herself down those steps. She’ll be cared for. At least three months and from then...we’ll have to see how she,” he clicked his tongue, “blossoms.”

“Three months.” Mia’s hands curled into Lucy’s gown. “You can’t do that.”

“She’s already been signed over by the psychologist.” A clipboard was offered to Olivia with a signature.

“Who is this Dr. Logan Myers? I want to speak with him. I want a second opinion!” She grew shrill. Lucy was crying softly there between them. Tongue drunken and swelled. Hands felt around for her family. “You can’t lock her up!”

Lucy couldn’t see anymore.

Threats exchanged. Her family forced from the room.

That signature smell before rainfall.

“Pity.” Lucy mumbled to herself. *It’s pity.* Eyes fluttering. She imagined the sun on her face and tons of little butterflies landing upon tanned skin. Opening and closing their wings as if to offer delicate kisses.

“There, there,” Brenner took his glove off to wipe her tears because he had to touch her, “all will be well. Very soon. Dream now.”

Lucy didn't.

** ** *

Next time Lucy saw Nolan Creed, he was sporting a nasty red welt upon his face. Brenner smirked when he saw it after the younger man exited a room with Olivia Garland being held back by her husband.

Posing as Logan Myers earned him a raise.

"You can't keep my baby!" The mother still shrilled and roared. Security got the family off the grounds.

Lucy wouldn't know how hard they fought.

"They left." Nolan had told her. "While ago. Thought maybe this was for the best."

She turned her head away to cry. Curling up with her broken arm cradled to her chest awkwardly. Figured maybe they were glad to be free of her. She'd gotten away from them. Gotten exactly what she wanted.

"Can I call them?" She wobbled there. He set a tray of food down. A single piece of strawberry candy in the corner for dessert to keep her sugar up after the long sleep. "You said-"

"They won't allow that. Not after the mess you made." He paused. Watched her shrink and touched a hand to her head. "But, if you behave yourself. Certain rules can be bent. Do you understand?"

"...Yes." Lucy ate the food without issue. Forced herself to despite the pain and cast holding her back. Intent on doing it herself. Even sucked the candy until it crunched. Nolan set a clipboard down to check a machine hooked up to her and eyes caught the signature. The one that sealed her fate. Myers.

And it so seemed like he might be the one to help her.

"What's going to happen to me? More drugs? The tank?"

"That depends." He didn't turn to see her.

“On what?”

“On how you behave.”

Repetition.

Bad girls get punished. They get bullets in their brains. They get clothing torn off. They get burned.

Good girls get pieces of candy and caresses upon blushed cheeks. They get hands to feed them.

Nolan was handsome. But, she caught a scent when he passed around her bed. The odd way he smiled and combed her hair out some to be kind. This musty tinge like mothballs. Perhaps, mold because it only grew.

Indifference. Apathy. To her. These chores. It wasn't worse than hopelessness but something about it made her want to cry until she was gagging up her carefully portioned hospital meal.

Nolan watched her well up and thought to help.

“Don't cry. Hate to see it in a pretty girl.”

A pretty and lucky girl.

He kissed her head for good measure.

"I'll help you make it better." His palm ran down her back.

It was all so...desperate. This need to prove himself to Brenner. This need to control something pretty and powerful.

And all Lucy wanted to do was laugh.

** ** *

They prodded. Days of pricking and pulling. Babying. A week in the hospital before she was pricked again and waking up back under Hawkins Lab.

Wandering around in her nice red cardigan. Made her stand out still.

Brenner liked her to stand out. Smiled when she stood taller despite fatigue and nerves screaming for her to lie that head down to rest.

Barker pushed and Nolan was there to comfort her. Little wounded kitten.

She liked Connie most. The bitch. Never hid her ugly emotions like Nolan. Never babied her either.

"Another one of Brenner's messes for me to clean." The blonde quipped once, going over a file. "Lucy, I do hope you're a fast learner."

"How long have you worked for Brenner exactly?" Nolan said while he cleaned up papers upon a table. Tried to be a tough guy.

"She works *with* Brenner," Lucy found herself correcting in her daze, "not *for* him."

Connie smiled at her, gave this little nod of approval. Good girl. What a good lab rat, Brenner trained her well. Push back. But, not too much. Not to your betters. These hands that fed you.

"She's right." Came the reply. "And don't forget to file those properly, they were a disaster last time. Reading is fundamental, Creed."

Lucy lowered her eyes. Teased something out just to see what it smelled like. Maybe that was wicked. But, if they could run tests on her, it could work both ways. Connie's genuine amusement bloomed oranges. Happiness was a citrus smell. More lemon and pine if it was confidence Lucy came to know.

It was a bold and stupid thing to say.

Nolan Creed seemed to like her a little less after that. He and Barker both just hated women. They liked the idea of women only. It was a common affliction in insecure, ugly men.

His edge of shame. That was sour milk again. Envy was just as bad. More sewage and saltwater to the nose.

Lucy found herself loving this. Even when it overwhelmed. It was a

secret she held at night. She'd whisper emotions and scents quietly to herself. Let those utters hide under the bed. A sort of rehearsal.

Brenner kept an official log when her trials began. Two weeks from waking in the hospital.

"Another easy emotion I see in others." He said while nursing a coffee. Sitting upon the table Lucy's chair was pushed all the way up to. "Lust. You push that back, the world will bow for you."

"Making someone lust in general and making them lust at me," she noted, eyes lifting, "it's different."

"Not important. Learn the scent first. Walk before you run, dear." He sipped. "Coffee?"

She wasn't feeling up to it.

"Yes, thank you."

He poured. One sugar. Splash of cream. She drank to appease him.

"Have my parents tried to see me? My sister?"

"No." His palm waved dismissively. Lie. "Hands."

They touched the table obediently.

"Now, Lucy, I believe this will be more uncomfortable for me than it is for you."

For a second, she actually believed him.

"Barker, come inside." Brenner rubbed his head and moved from the table. "Lucy, open your blouse."

"Why?"

That was wrong. A single nod sent a slap scathing across her face. Barker liked it. If she inhaled, he'd probably smell like an orange grove. She didn't even cry out from it. More shock. A swelling along her hot cheek that burned.

Brenner never struck her, he had people to do that for him. Thank you very much.

Lucy realized she'd never been fully hit before. Not even her parents slapped her. Hair flicked when her head lulled back into place. A kink etched her neck. Barker was closer. Staring down and waiting for the chance to do it again. She blinked, licked a bead of blood from her lip. Tasted raspberry candy she'd been given with lunch. Heavy, red eyes stared back at him.

"Pull down your top." Brenner said while he swished his coffee. "I'm trying to make this quick and painless for you. Don't be so difficult." Men never like difficult women.

Fingers were too stiff to move.

"Show yourself to him so he'll be...responsive. That's all we need. Like a bandage." Came the elaboration. "He won't touch you. Do you not trust me?"

That did it.

Buttons unclasped until the cool air kissed her. Barker drank Lucy in. Fingers twitching. Tongue sliding over his mouth. He wanted to bite her. And then it came as she held her top open. Shaking.

Cotton candy. Caramel. More burnt as it lasted. A sugar storm. Lust.

"You have it?" Brenner asked carefully, eyes intent on her face.

"Yes." She didn't fix herself until he gave the okay. Barker left all worked up.

"You've done so well. Your own little stamp collection, is it not?" He turned to her. "Lucy?"

When she didn't speak, his thumb came up to wipe the blood under her bottom lip. She thought he might lick the pad for a second.

"Next week, you're going to push." Martin pressed her blood into a handkerchief. Something for him to admire later. His own stamp collection of subjects. "I have so much faith in you. We're going to

change things.”

We.

“Now, how about you get a nice walk for all the hard work you’ve done?” He took her right arm. The left was still in a cast. “About the gardens.”

“I’d like that,” she shuffled along, day dreaming of a carnival full of lights. An ocean that was vast. “Thank you, Martin.”

The garden was at the center of the lab. Closed off. A small, green space. Not like her mother’s garden at all. But, something lively that made her dream sweet and soft. Where the sun could touch her face. Bright red, she circled all by herself. Let her head tip back to drink in the rays.

“Lucy.” Came a whisper. Through a crack in glass.

Logan Myers. She hadn’t seen him since pulling and begging to be saved. That was foolish. Punishment put her in a cast.

She ignored him because she would get into trouble if they were found.

“They bugged my office.”

“Of course they did.” A smile crossed. “We’re all insects. I think you’d be a pretty moth drawn to light and I...”

“I’m going to continue sessions with you and the others. They’re keeping me under...conditions. But, you have to know-”

“I’ve learned,” she breathed and came to him, “I’ve learned lots of things.” Those dark brown eyes, tired and sunken. She smiled an empty grin. Let the sunlight illuminate it. “You’re like them. You put your name on me and now I’m here to play forever and ever I bet.”

Lucy gave a spin to no music.

“What?”

"I saw it." She only danced, balancing on a stone path. "Your name on my papers. You signed me over to this place."

"They forged my..." He looked down with searching eyes. Realized he was a prisoner of this place just as her. "I had nothing to do with that, Lucy." She giggled and continued to dance there in the sun. In a dream with a prince to spin her round and round.

"You're driving over the speed limit, Dr. Myers."

"I saw the others." These words stilled her. Lucy came closer to the glass. He leaned in real close. Glasses tilting down. "I believe you."

And she caught it. Something foreign. Peppermint. Trust. He did indeed. The scent brought some awareness back.

"Of course you do." She touched the window, tapped her nail just over his face. "Now."

"I wanted to give you something."

"You're staying here?"

"I can help."

Lucy wanted to scream. *No, no, you can't. You'll get a bullet in your eye socket. Digested. Covered up.*

"One of them...she didn't make it. This was left behind in her room. Take it."

Lucy came back to reality in full when a ring glimmered there in the cracked glass. Eyes welled with grief she held back. That iridescent gemstone.

She imagined Kristen under a sheet with purple fingers unable to smooth over piano keys.

"Did she have family? They should have this."

"No. Just this place." Logan took her hand and put the ring here. Closed her fingers. Lucy looked up.

"You're here to stay and play too." Came a sigh. "The experiment doesn't end."

Logan didn't answer. Looked around before he slipped away and left her there.

** ** *

1982

Benny made good on his promise of fries. Lucy picked at a small basket and sipped water. Mulled over the newspaper. Customers ate and joked while she flipped a page, sunlight crept in through the window.

A bell gave a pleasant ring. New customer stepping up to order.

"Usual, Jim?" Benny's voice caused her to look up. A smile curled before she could stop the damn thing.

"As long as Flo doesn't catch me here."

"Well, you know I can't lie to her. More scared of Flo than you." Benny's joke earned laughter from the boys near them.

"You want me to shut you down?"

"That'd require you to do your job, Chief." Earl quipped. More laughter.

"Assholes." Jim smirked and tipped Benny, turned to catch a pair of brown eyes. Lucy flicked a salute with two fingers. His breath hitched, a smirk curled before his chin tilted up. "What's a girl like you doing with these bums?" He approached, one thumb in his belt.

"I'll do just about anything for a couple french fries." She sat up when he slid into the booth across from her.

No, this wasn't a date. Just friends who ran into each other.

"Something's different about you, Chief." Lucy tapped her chin. Helped herself to another fry dipped in ketchup.

“Not hungover for once.” He dug into his pocket for an orange bottle. Popped a tiny pill and swallowed it dry.

“Hmm, maybe.” She cocked her head as if she were genuinely thinking about it. “Let’s see. Khaki uniform. Check. Shiny badge. Check. The hair? No. Not that. But, I’m close.”

Jim smiled at her teasing. It was becoming. Amazing how he spent the entire day annoyed and disinterested until this hour.

The sprinkle of citrus brought a lightness out of her. An ease.

“Ah, I got it.” Lucy put up her painted nail. Black cherry lacquer. “A Chief without his hat.”

“You know, it did seem colder up top. You ever consider detective work?”

“I could never pull off khaki, Jim.”

“How am I doing with it?”

Oof, she walked into that one. Another twitch until her mouth spread to giggle.

“Not bad at all actually.” She bit her lip and Jim stared. A basket was plopped down.

“For you, Chief. Don’t harass my best customer.” Benny joked, patting his arm and Lucy chuckled again

“Best? You give her free food all the time and I’ve never seen her eat a cheeseburger without cutting it in half. Never finishes.”

“I always tip. And I cut it to portion later, smartass.” One brow rose.

“And she laughs at my bad jokes.” Benny added. “Man can’t ask for more.”

“Poor Lucy.” Jim sat back. “Thanks, Ben.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Benny punched his shoulder and left them.

“So, you’re holding my hat hostage.” Jim was lifting the bun after she passed ketchup over. “I have to fight it out of you?”

Her voice lowered. Almost sultry.

“I’m not sure I’ll put up too much of a fight, Jim.”

Ketchup squirted over melty cheese and missed the burger when he choked with amusement and mild shock at the *subtle* line. Jim had a long drink of coke. Still snorting to himself before he took a bite.

"You're so...different." He observed. Yes, he'd said it before.

"You have no idea. Bad different?"

"No, there's still some clumsy spitfire in you, I'm sure." He joked and missed her smile fading before it flashed again.

"I'm not so sure these days." They both were different. Jim especially since his torrid return to Hawkins.

"Want some?" He swallowed, offering the burger with one hand. "Oh, I forgot. Bite size pieces. Don't tell me you eat pizza with a knife and fork."

Lucy sucked her straw at that.

"I avoid pizza not because of the carbs. I can eat plenty of delicious carbs in portion with my routine. But, I avoid it so you don't mock."

"We eat finger food 'round these parts, ma'am." Jim took another bite as she reach across to swat his arm. "Assaulting a police office, Luce."

"You won't be getting the hat back." Came her retort.

"Have a bite without utensils. Mess up the lipstick for once." He offered the cheeseburger as a challenge so she took his wrist and sunk her teeth into it. Eyes locked before her amusement quelled and she covered her mouth, trying to laugh and chew at the same time. Felt like teens.

"I hate you." She muffled into her palm, swallowing. Jim caught the

boys watching from their table. Heads whipped around and Benny smiled to himself. The Chief quieted at that, catching mauve lipstick smeared on the bun. Damning.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” Jim raised his brow and reached forward without thinking. Thumbed the corner of her mouth to fix the color swatched there. Lucy inhaled sharper, froze to see his blue eyes. Caught her plum lipstick on his digit and sat back. The smile fell away. Unsteady all the sudden. Hot and shaky. Next breath wasn’t easy.

“I gotta go.” Lucy left the newspaper and gave her empty fry basket to Benny. Jim felt this rush like he’d done something wrong. It was enough to send another pill into his mouth. “See you later, Jim.” She plucked up her purse over the table. Didn’t let him get many words in before she was out the door. Same sweet ding from the bell.

Her car engine jumped to life. One split second where she felt Jim’s eyes from the window before speeding off to finish her errands.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading, chat with me below on my tumblr blog, Alias-B! Trying to get this one out earlier with all the craziness. ♥◻♥◻

5. Bluebirds Fly

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter content is dark, Lucy is in the bowels of the lab. Smut ahoy though.

***TW: Animal death, slut shaming, abuse, experimentation, gaslighting, and sexual abuse. It's not super detailed explicitly, but it still occurs.

1965

Lucy felt like a bride. Dressed in a white, cotton dress until Brenner helped her into that bloody red cardigan. Hands cupped her face.

"Today is a new beginning. Everything you were before, let it rot." Thumbs smoothed her cheeks. All the hitting. The drug induced trips. The clawing. Her little stamp collection for them to show off. "Promise me you'll do everything I ask."

"I promise, Martin." She breathed so he slipped away, took her arm in his. They walked together, metal clicking under rubber heels. Lucy watched Brenner while he looked ahead. Light and almost gleeful. Encouraged. Lemon pine confidence she tried to feed off of as her flesh began to pulse. On instinct, she burrowed into him. Free hand gripping the sleeve of his coat.

"Don't be nervous, Lucy." Martin was patting her hand. Men in lab coats and suits stared from all angles. "Today, you get an audience. They're all friends. Support for you. Only you." Connie was the only woman here in some level of power. Something annoying about that. Nolan held a door open to an attached room with a glass window.

She was an exotic animal for them to observe. Brenner sat her down at a table.

"Hands."

Palms about smacked the table flat. Stayed there. Little awkward with the cast still. This was something he ingrained into her. When

she was bad. Emotional. Hands flat on the table until he said so. Sometimes, all he had to do was change his tone. Raise his voice one octave. Her hands were already waiting and flat. Docile.

Brenner smiled. She was just so good. Barker entered with a metal cage. Set it upon the table. Nolan and another scientist outfitted her with wires. Something squeaked in the cage. Two rats colored white and grey. Running around. Stopping to look up with beady eyes.

“Remember to push hard.” Brenner leaned over her. One hand touched the back of her neck. Fingers threading through black locks. “We’re all watching. Push back. Let’s start with something easy. Anger. You came to know it as-”

“Burnt rubber.” Lucy replied evenly. Eyes on him when they were left alone. She smelled the squealing rubber when she refused a treat from Nolan two days ago. Hypoglycemia made her difficult and irritable. He pulled her hair and pushed a tiny truffle into her mouth. Left two fingers in just to watch her choke around them. Burnt sugar wafted after that. Smelled it also when Barker smacked her around for being naughty. Uncooperative.

Sometimes that anger was so great, it washed out. These men poked at her and she wasn’t always agreeable. Little bear cub.

Bleach. That was hatred. For an omnipotent, peculiar creature. For a woman. Often Lucy thought about drinking it through a candy cane swirled straw.

“Take all that fury and hate, Lucy, and force it out into the world.”

It was an evil thing he asked of her, to make the world uglier than it already was. To leave it that way.

Lucy pressed her lips with watering eyes. Nodded. Brenner left her with the cage. Two curious creatures rooting around for food.

How long had she been in this place? Had her parents tried again to fight their way to their sick daughter?

She wobbled and watched the rats play. Scurrying about and running along the wheel. Brenner leaned over outside. Too many

eyes watched her and nothing happened.

“Lucy.” He said. “Focus.”

She stared at the rats. Thought long and hard because she finally could think straight without drugs turning her to jello. Nothing. No glimmer in her eyes to spark rebellion.

“You’re not pushing.”

“I’m trying.” She replied with no emotion in space. No fire left in her soul from the bright child she used to be. They beaten her down. If she embarrassed Brenner, they’d pump her with insulin and deny the proper nutrition to follow it.

That happened last week when she resisted a pill that made her float. Barker laughed and held a candy bar above her head.

Her flat palms turned to fists.

These men who held treats above her head would piss if she unfurled. Let her psyche drown them. Pull their wounds back open because she was special and she had a power. No emotion could hide, she’d flip every switch. Pour sickly sweet juice into their mouths as it was forced on her all her life for her own good.

“Lucy.” Brenner sighed this time and she knew punishment was coming. “Barker, help her out.”

That sent her pulse into a frenzy.

Barker smiled and shut the door.

“Do as you’re told.”

She stared at the rats. He stepped closer.

“Make it work.” Barker hit the metal table and she cried out, shut her eyes. “Do it!”

They all watched on. Lucy’s head snapped up. Eyes on Barker now. *Make it work.*

It flooded her tongue and nose. That burnt rubber. The cleanliness of bleach. Seeped down her throat. Lucy wheezed for air and he stopped upon seeing her huge, blackened eyes. His own fists curled. A vein in his forehead popped forth.

Face bright and rosy red.

A growl and he hit the table so hard, it dented. Lucy jerked up to scramble away from his wrath. The cage was sent flying, cracking open to let two terrified rats out. Barker screamed. Nowhere to channel his rage. He just knew he wanted to breathe smoke. Lucy felt the sensation flood until veins darkened around her eyes. Until blood dripped down a nostril, hitting the white gown.

“She’s doing it.” Brenner breathed. “Incredible.”

Barker was still slamming things around. The table. The chair. He plucked up one rat by the tail and smashed it so hard, blood exploded into the wall. Lucy crawled to get away from him.

“Martin!” She beat on the glass for help. Picking up the other grey rat to hide it in her cardigan. “Martin!”

“Calm him down, Lucy, you brought this upon yourself.”

The poor rat was squeaking into her chest. She cradled it and Barker seemed to remember her there. He yanked up the chair and raised it high.

Lucy screamed and lifted her hands. Lavender came in a might wave. Steam. Barker inhaled and the chair fell behind him. Eyes glazed over before knees hit the floor. His head bent like he might be bowing to her. Lucy sniffled and slid back further, drained. Little claws scrambling around her breast.

The door opened.

“Take Barker away for assistance.” Brenner came to her. Swept down. “You’re magnificent.” The rat poked its head up. “Get rid of this. Lucy’s earned such a treat.”

“No.” She sobbed. “Please, let me keep it! Please. Please, don’t take

him away. He's so small." Hands gripped it firmly to her collar. Desperate and inconsolable. Half deranged. Too drained to speak straight. "Can I keep him? I'll name him and feed him. Won't take up any room. Let me keep-"

"Nonsense, you're being hysterical." Brenner plucked the rat up by its skin. Dropped it into a garbage bag when one was offered. Lucy reeled back and cried there. Blood flooding from her nose and ears. "Hush, now."

Martin Brenner was stronger than he looked because he lifted her body up into his arms. Rapunzel in her tower awaiting a prince to carry her away.

Men rushed about and Brenner ignored them. Gazed down at Lucy Garland because she was the still point to his turning world this hour. Arms and legs hung limply. She thought for a moment that he was Dracula about to edge sharp teeth into her warm neck. Suck her dry like a fuzzy, succulent peach.

"More tests to come tomorrow. Let's get you cleaned up." They went into a separate room. Brenner made her recline upon a table, limp hair and limbs strewn about. He pulled her clothing off until she shivered before a bath was run. And it was strange. He didn't bother to drink her frame in. Didn't smell of burnt sugar. Just wrapped her cast in plastic carefully.

Dim light still managed to make her dewy. Eyes tired as she blinked up at him. Didn't try to curl into a ball.

"I want to stop."

"You shouldn't lie to yourself, Lucy." Brenner removed his jacket. Took the time to fold it aside. Loosened his tie. Set that nicely atop as well. Sleeves rolled up. She'd never seen him so causal before. "You felt a rush. You want more."

A hand gripped her hip, fingers dug into flesh. His arm went under the small of her back. Lifting her up into a curve until ribs jutted forth. She thought of paintings her mother always talked about. Fleshy women in twisted positions. About to be assaulted. Changed.

Used. Transformed.

Metamorphosis.

“You are so beautiful, did you know that?” Hair fell into his eye. “You look like you’re clothed in the sun.”

Lucy reached up without thinking to smooth the strand aside. Because he had a hold on her.

“Incredible.” Brenner nestled her into a bath. Hot water blushed her skin some, but she relaxed into it. Head lulling against the side. Brenner shut the water off and stayed crouched there before her. Lucy closed her eyes and sunk down away from him. Let silence shut her in. Bubbles trickled up until he pulled her back.

“Now, now. None of that.” He shifted and dumped some strawberry shampoo into his palms. Lathered her hair up. It felt good and she hated that. How sweet and tender he was being.

He looked at the water. Felt a strange and playful urge to flick it up toward her face. Watched the droplets fall. Lucy didn’t bat an eyelash splayed there. Wondered only if that was something funny his mother used to do to him.

“Are your parents alive?” Lucy asked. Martin tilted her head back to wash the suds out.

“No.” He said softer, reaching for conditioner.

“What was your mother’s name?” Lucy kept going and didn’t stop. Desperate for threads. “What did she make you to bring you up when you cried? Did she tell you stories at night? Chase your monsters away?”

Brenner had stopped after conditioning her hair.

“Does she have your eyes? Was your father around? Are they proud of you, Martin? What was the name of your best friend in high school? Did you ever get a detention?” How she pried for more and more of him. “Did you go to your high school prom with someone special? Did they grant you a kiss after it was done?”

“My mother’s name was Amanda.” Brenner plucked up a bar of soap to offer it. “Wash your body. I’ll be back in three minutes with a towel.”

Lucy watched him go. Braced her covered arm up along the side to finish in silence.

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They kept trials up with rats. Lucy filled them with pheromones. Made them too somber to eat, they starved. Caused them quake such a fury, that they ate each other. Few times it leaked out when someone entered her room. Cattle prods and a tiny, metal isolation room leveled that right out.

Only person she never really smelled in full or influenced was Brenner. He held her too tight. Fear overshadowed any power over him. Weeks. She’d been here weeks. Fall closed in. Lucy once dreamed of entering college. Impressing them with her quick piano skills. She hadn’t played in months.

Every time a new line of subjects were toted in, it was like she was back to the start. A need to scream always snuffed out. She was kept separate from them either way.

Logan was clinical during their sessions. His office was bugged still. But, he and Lucy found a loophole. Passing notes he destroyed after.

How’s the arm?

Itchy as hell. She wrote. Frankly, he was her only solace in this place. ***The others?***

Not well. Logan hesitated. Rubbed his eyes under the glasses. ***I can get you out of here .***

We’ll die. Lucy debated it. ***They’ll hurt our families. Cover it up.***

She decided to change the subject. They made idle conversation to cover the pencil scratching. Mundane stuff. Him swirling her brains around. She passed the slip over.

What was your sister's name?

Logan stopped.

Angel

“How are you responding to treatment?” Logan said. “These trips, do they take you to dark places?”

“No, they watch me. Make sure I don't stray.” Dark eyes lifted.
Pretty name.

Your family. They're trying for you. Don't think for a second they aren't. Brenner made it difficult. Threatened you. Official story to Hawkins: You had a breakdown. Family has to do as they're told if they want you safe. I'm sorry.

Lucy shivered. Pressed her lips with watery eyes. Covered them so he didn't see the tears spill. Thought about how Hawkins probably wasn't surprised at all. She was just too strange.

“I'm sorry, I'm just very tired, Dr. Myers.” She scribbled a note with shaken hands. ***Can you get them a message?*** It was too much to ask. But, Logan ripped some paper away and offered the scrap to her.

She sniffled harder and swallowed. ***Don't look for me. I love you all. So much.***

Logan's hand covered her own. Tucked the folded scrap aside.

“The work you do for Brenner is unmatched from what I've seen. You're making real progress.”

“I feel almost alive. Almost dead. Sometimes I'm wide awake and dreaming. Sleep is...black and I don't mind it.”

“You're drained. I'll chat with them about that.”

I have a family friend who can deliver this. He wrote next.

What's your family like?

Logan hesitated again. *They're complicated. Not into savory hobbies.*

"Thank you." She blinked. *Mob types?* A smirk pulled her lips and he followed.

Something like that.

And you became a shrink?

Hoping to escape it. Didn't work.

She was still wearing her red cardigan. Washed and pressed for her every morning with a carefully picked outfit. Waves of hair longer, they thought to cut it. But, wouldn't touch her without Brenner's instruction. Lucy rubbed her cast, shoulders dropping.

"You have a new trial coming." Logan broke the silence.

"They said it was a big one." Lucy held herself with one arm. Eyes on the wall behind him. "I hope I pass with flying colors. I always do. Letting everyone down would be my greatest unhappiness."

"Does it make you happier, when others think highly of you?"

"Someone turning their head and patting my cheek, it's a high and I know that makes me broken."

"Broken? Why's that?"

"Because I've been loved all my life, why is this different? Why didn't I let that love be the norm even when it was displaced and messy. My brain is just fooling itself the way it builds dimensions to survive this." Lucy inhaled. "Love. That's one scent I don't think I'll ever place."

"There's still time to work things through and come out a whole person." All this hope he'd packed away. Pouring just for her to touch. Lucy stood up and crossed to get into his space and inhale, lips parting.

"Crisp old books. A whole cathedral's worth. That's what hope

smells like. How funny. Sorta poetic too." She blinked at him there inches away. "Thank you, Dr. Myers. I'll keep this one special."

A bell dinged.

"Session's over."

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1982

Red wine was preferable at night when the frogs and crickets began to harmonize. TV illuminated some old black and white flick she allowed to play just to create more background noise. Still dressed, Lucy kicked her heels aside and washed the makeup away. Ruffled her hair to break the style some.

Filled a glass to the brim. A knock pulled her from the first sip.

"Chief Hopper." Lucy let herself sigh with some ease at the sight of him. This friend who brought comfort by just being there beside her.

"You seem surprised to see me."

"Suppose I am." Lucy moved aside to let him in. Locked the door in both places.

"I'm attached to my hat."

"I work tomorrow."

"Forcing me up at a reasonable hour will make Flo happy."

"So you can drive home and crawl back into bed?" She crossed her arms. Jim's eyes flicked aside.

"Yeah."

"I have scotch." Lucy sighed and turned to go into her kitchen. Jim dug into his pockets for a tiny pill. Caught her eyes and swallowed it. No comment followed. They both were dealing with shit.

Chief Jim Hopper was considerably less grumpy around the

Garland girl. That was noted around town. But, they didn't make each other magically better.

"You ran out on me at lunch." He said it like a question. Quietly.

"Forgot something I had to do that was time sensitive."

"Nothing to do with the boy's staring?"

"I'm used to boys staring these days, Jim, if you believe it." Her tone brought amusement to his expression. Head shaking, he came to take the glass she poured. "Used to be I drowned in baggy hand-me-downs and stumbled in those old saddle shoes."

"I liked the shoes," he leaned onto the island counter with one elbow. Glasses clicked. She took a longer drink than she should have. This dynamic she and Jim started. They didn't talk much about it. These things happen. Stain the sheets. Wash. Repeat.

Brown eyes lowered before she drank again. Another long swig he mirrored.

"Watching *Casablanca*?" Jim picked up his glass and went around her to see.

"Been feeling nostalgic." She came to him, head tilting before sinking into the couch. Jim sat a cushion away from her.

"Here's looking at you, kid." Jim quoted from the screen, causing Lucy to snort to herself. She reclined back in her dress. Simple and fitted. A tight gold watch on her wrist. Looked like a shackle at first. Legs curled up next to him. Toe nails painted black under stockings.

Jim finished his drink. She felt compelled to follow. Eyes met.

"What are we doing, Jim?" Lucy rubbed her eyes, a smile crossed because this was absurd. He was so still and chaotic around town these days. As emotionally unavailable as she was. "Are we just...using each other?"

"Using?"

“For sex, I mean. I don’t know how to put it.” She shrugged. “You make rounds. Am I just a stop in that? Someone you pulled over for driving too fast.”

“Pulled you over a couple times.”

“Are you pulling others over?”

He didn’t answer. Which felt like a small yes. Jim drinks a lot. Takes girls home. Forgets to call. He didn’t call Lucy today after seeing her at lunch but her door was still the one he wanted to knock on.

He can be crass and rude. Especially in the morning. Dismissive. Shows up to work late. A job he clearly doesn’t give a shit about. Popping pills Lucy knew for a fact he didn’t have a prescription for.

And she was a Rolodex of secrets.

“Do you care?”

“Do you care if I...” Lucy trailed off. Neither replied. The high instrumental from the TV played on when she sat up to hover near him. “Maybe let’s not talk about it. Not like either of us can answer for it. I like what we’re doing.”

Lucy licked her lips, hand pressed near his head on the back of the sofa.

“I want more.”

Jim took her chin and kissed her without ceremony. His thumb traced her lips before he tasted them once more. Mouths coaxed open. Scotch and red wine. A linger from the cigarette he smoked on the way to her door. Jim was all burnt sugar. Slipping from his tongue into her wanting mouth.

Broad hands pulled her into his lap. Friction was enough to force an arch so he could explore her neck. Lucy’s dress rode up and Jim paused to look down at the garters she was programmed to wear. One finger hooked a strap to snap it, earning a shove.

“Don’t be fresh, Jim.” Lucy slipped off him, draped her legs across his lap while he leaned into her. Two clasps came undone, his palm sunk under the thin fabric to feel her skin all the way down.

“Don’t get mad when I toss this on your perfect carpet.” He flicked it and went for the next. Lucy had his collar in her grasp, kissing him until they were both dizzy. Until Jim muffled a sound when they slid down off the couch. Lucy grunted because he landed atop her between the table and sofa. His weight bearing down. Jim came up on his hands but her legs went around him. “Crushing you?”

“Damn right.” Lucy opened her lips into his, felt him turn to mush at that alone. Palms went everywhere as the credits rolled, darkening the room further. He came up again to breathe, let her hands tug at buttons until they were on his belt.

“Get this damn thing off.” Jim urged the dress up over her head. Hips pushed into his, earning a grunt. Left fumbling arms twisted above her head in fabric so he could nip down the line of a collarbone. The TV flickered moments of light against their faces and bodies.

Lucy tossed her dress up at the same moment he felt it. A straight, old scar across the bottom of her belly just at the line of her underwear. Not as raised as it used to be with the test of time. He’d felt it and other old scars from whatever life had tossed at her. But, this one...

Lips kissed it either way. A question for a different hour. Lucy thought to stop him, but he came up again to cover her mouth in his. Arms hesitated. Tried to stay down. Jim liked it when she arched and grabbed for him. Became enthralled as those painted nails raked in his hair and down his back. So he took her wrist and brought it to his shoulder in a way of encouragement.

“Jim.” One moan and his pants were open. Lips touched his ear. “I need it now.”

He obliged. Cupping her through thin fabric to be a fucking tease. Fingers jerked the flimsy, damp cloth aside so he could settled against her. Lucy kept murmuring for more. Pulling at his shoulders.

Arms around him with her face buried in his neck. Facial hair left those delightful pink brush strokes as he pushed inside her.

A sigh of satisfaction followed. Him filling her to the brim just as she asked. Jim cupped Lucy's face again. Kept running his thumb against swollen lips between kisses while she kissed and licked the pad back.

Lucy held tight. Asked him to fuck her. So, he did right there on the carpet. Both twisted in each other and their clothing.

Jim tried not to make noise, but she felt so good here. An arm coiled behind her head when his hips began to snap harder. This round wasn't going to be a long one. Not while Lucy moaned shamelessly and bucked and pulled for him. Not while Jim crushed her down and fucked her hard into the floor the way she delightfully begged.

Teeth grazed his shoulder until a hiss rose up heavy lungs. Lucy thought to tell him how good he smelled, but the magnitude of it would have been lost. Hands. His fucking hands. Pulling her hair and tugging her bra down. Sprinkles of hair scratched while Jim teased one nipple. Shifted to torment the other. Fingers slid under the collar of his shirt.

Blood boiling, she whined for more.

He kissed her again, drank in her moans and pleas. Snaked a hand down to work her toward a peak, slipping all over arousal until Lucy quaked. Orgasm curved her spine. Fingers pushed her lips open. He watched her suckle from them until his own end neared.

"Fuck, Lucy, fuck!" Jim gave into it completely. Pushed his face into her neck to finish inside her. Lucy kissed his fingertips and palm until he lifted. Hair a mess and eyes fatigued.

"Jim, you little screamer," she teased beneath him. His hips gave a rut to elicit a gasp. He pulled out. Lifted off her because he wanted to stay there forever. Lucy fixed her bra and panties, pushed herself up. Felt release leaking out into a stain he'd already made.

“Sorry about the carpet.”

“I’ll clean it later.” Her body hummed. Muscles still spasming. Thighs sore. It was all so delightful.

She missed the weight and heat of him mere seconds after. Jim zipped himself back up. Looked into her eyes and felt compelled to swoop forward for one fierce kiss like the sky wasn’t falling.

Technicolor played all neon. Lucy cupped his face to prolong it, pressed into him. Hands took her hips. Kept her from swooning because she was happy here on the floor with Jim Hopper. It felt safe with the dull buzz of television echoing. Fingertips traced her skin, found that scar again until she winced back.

“Don’t-”

“Sorry.” Jim paused, but she cringed further away. Unsteady again. Gathering the dress into herself. “I’m sorry.”

“I think you should go.” Lucy burst quietly. “We both work early tomorrow.”

“Right,” Jim stared at her while she looked at the carpet, “yeah.” He got up first and she hurried after before he could help. Hopper felt that guilt again like he’d hurt her. And sex usually served to hurt himself. But, Lucy didn’t hurt him. “Hey-”

“And Jim...” Her eyes shut and opened in one beat. Head lifting to see that sullen expression. The somber, quiet contemplation he was know for. This reserved way of reading others even if he said nothing about what he saw. “Don’t forget your hat.”

** ** *

1965

The cast came off her left arm. Took a millennium at the rate diabetics heal. Wasn’t a time for celebration. It marked too many weeks here and a twist in her identity. The little garden oasis in the middle of the lab began to change colors. Leaves all orange and brown.

Not an hour after it was off, Brenner made it official. Zero. Subject Zero. Sometimes, the men joked that she was a siren. Able to lure souls to the grave.

Three digits inked into her arm with a buzzing needle. 000. Tiny and high on her wrist where they would be hidden under a laminated identification bracelet. Marked with her birth date, blood type, and disease.

“Don’t scratch, you’ll ruin it.” Nolan chided her, pressing patches to her chest. A wired device went around her skull. Machines beeped in tune. Her readings made a song. Lucy smiled to herself with it.

“Play it, Sam. Play.” She whispered to herself.

“Hm?” Nolan turned from his charts.

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking of a movie I used to watch.” Lucy cocked her head with fatigue.

“Miss the television?”

“Books help. I’d like to watch the TV once in a while. Suppose I have plenty of long, sappy movies in my imagination.” She shrugged. “You all keep me too busy for such things.”

“What’s say I speak to them?” How he pulled for her friendship at every turn. “We could watch together. Make popcorn. Almost like a date.” Nolan sat next to her and touched her knee. “Remember your last date?”

“Yes.” Long before school ended. *I got fucked*. Her head turned from him, knee shifting. Something about Nolan’s growing confidence was slightly sour. Insecurity. Desperation. He reeked. Longed to have her wrapped around his finger drooling for him. He tried too hard to stay on Brenner’s good side. Tried to have the pulled Martin did. Jealousy etched when Lucy was fed cookies from his fingers. Nolan felt her chill at him and stood to go.

“We’ve been together months, Lucy. I’ve dedicated my time to you. Only you.” He rasped. “And you’re not receptive to my care. Tell me how I can ease you.” Those damn fingers on her knee. “I could get

you something better to wear. Find you a film to watch. Try again to get you just a few minutes on the phone. I'm on your side. I want to help you." Brenner wasn't please that he couldn't do his one job to break into her shell.

Lie.

He's just so fucking insecure. Wah, Brenner doesn't give me gold stars. Grow the fuck up.

"I'm just tired." A woman's textbook line. And she was. That weight pulled her down. Lucy decided being here, it was better to feel everyone else's emotions so she didn't have to touch her own.

It kind of thrilled her too. That he couldn't seep into her marrow. That she had some influence and pull over someone without these abilities. She watched him try and try and fail. Like a little puppy unable to get a simple trick right.

A finger traced the numbers. *Zero*. It was a distinct marker that she would never be the only one. Not when she'd given Martin Brenner hope for more. Hope that special minds could be pushed until they turned from caterpillar to butterfly. She took some blame for it. Maybe not all, but enough to keep her awake at night. That was inevitable.

But, she never worked up the gall to ask about the others that passed their tests.

A trickle of sweat came down her head. More damn readings. Skull swirling lighter. A great fall to come for her.

"Nolan. I think..." Lucy gripped the bed and felt herself sag. They weren't feeding her enough this week. Fatigue and low sugar paled her out. Kept the fight away. "Nolan, it's happening."

She knew her body well enough.

"Feeling light, are we?" He looked at her pulling the wires off. Curling up on the bed to search around for something. Anything with sugar. "Poor thing."

"I..." The machines whizzing mechanics grated on her. Her lips slurred. "I need..."

A head fell into pillows. Body began the quivering. This world blurred and spun. Nolan went to a fridge for a juice box. Stabbed a straw into it and knelt by her. Brown eyes fluttering.

"Please."

"Sure you're not just tired?" He tucked her hair aside like this was a joke. "Say please again. Please, Nolan."

Lucy flashed at him. Quivering.

"P-Please, Nolan."

"Say that you need me."

She hated him. More than Connie and Barker and even Martin Brenner.

"I *ngh*...need you."

"Kiss me, Lucy. A sweet for a sweet." Nolan poked his lips. A drunk mouth grimaced and came to his. Fingers yanked her hair so he could invade her. Making a smacking sound when they parted for good measure. "That's a good girl." The straw was offered. She sucked quick to get the sugar in her body as he patted her head. Apple juice spilt because he pulled it back from her grabbing hands. "Sing me a song from those old movies you like. Musical girl, they told me."

"Nolan, please." Tears sprang. Her body cried out. Unable to function like it was a light flickering. Trying to stay on. "Stop, j-just stop it."

"Sing me the song that other Garland girl sang. You know the one. They say she was pilled up too before slipping those ruby slippers on. Made for a great show, didn't it?"

"C-Can't." He was a filthy, woman hating pig.

"Sing." He even hummed for her.

“Some...where over t-the r-rainbow...” Whispers rattled. *“B-B-Bluebirds fly.”*

“There we go.” He leaned in to hear her. Thin body limp along the bed.

“Birds f-fly over the...the rainbow.” Tears leaked. She forced the words out. Because art and music let the world know she was free. Somehow. Somewhere. *“Wh...Why then, oh why can't I?”*

“That’s wasn’t so hard now, was it? Needy thing, you are. In heat.” Nolan gave her the juice. Stood up to leave. “You need me, Lucy. Don’t forget that I can make your life so much easier here. Out of the goodness in my heart.”

Lucy decided that one day she was going to hurt him. Hurt him bad. She’d wait until that moment presented itself.

** ** *

In truth, she felt like a Judy Garland.

They dressed her up. Paraded her before men in suits. Lab coats poked at her. Spectators that demanded a show and encore.

Lucy bet her heart was actually all neon and technicolor. Pulsing toxic blood through wanting veins.

Controlled environment. Tests she always passed. Better by the hour. She performed, unfurling from a chrysalis, in every screen test that was demanded. Learned not to let the pheromones flood and leak. Learned how to zero in on one soul and pump them full of her silent song.

“Martin!” She screamed during a new trial. Barker threw her into the corner of her test room. Chained a rabid wolf to the other corner and locked the door. “I can’t!”

“Calm it down, Lucy. Think bigger, dear.” A voice droned beyond the mirror. She scrambled against the side. Jaws snapped at her. Barking echoed with a rattling chain. The tether gave it inches of breathing room so she became a ball.

Lavender seeped again. The snarling animal looked into her eyes. Fur rustling before it set its head down and curled up next to her. Lucy sobbed, crawled forward to touch it. This dangerous beast. This victim like her. Threw her arms around its huge neck and didn't get eaten. It only sighed and nudged. Whined out.

"Pure belladonna." Martin was at the door again with outstretched arms. Lucy lifted her gaze. Red rimmed eyes and blood dripping that the wolf didn't try to lap up. "You're ready, Lucy. Ready to go out. I have the upmost faith in you."

The wolf prodded at her breast. Whined again.

"Come here to me, Lucy."

"Will you let her back into the woods? I'm sure she has a family who misses her." She sniffled harder without getting up. Clinging to the lonely creature. "Promise me."

"I promise you." Martin offered, scratching his chin before he came for her hand.

She believed him. Took it while holding steady on his eyes.

"Come now, you're drained. You need to eat. Keep that strength up."

Lucy did well today. So he comforted her. Kissed her head and held her hand. Talked in soothing tones about how proud he was. What a magnificent young woman she's become.

"If you pass this next trial, the world it'll open for you." Brenner cupped her face before going to pick up a tray of lunch. Sandwich. Apple slices. Water. When she was good like today, Brenner would cut a truffle in half and share it with her. The half sat in the corner awaiting.

She ate every bite. He stayed and mulled over files. Kept her company. Made her chatter about books or movies like they were friends.

"Next week, you're going out. Into the world again. You're ready."

He offered it so softly, she choked on water.

“Outside?”

“Yes, did you really think I’d keep you locked up in here forever?” Martin’s fingers grazed her cheek. “This is sort of your final exam. And you have one chance, Lucy, to get it right. You’ll be briefed when the time comes. For now, we need you strong and focused. I know you’ll make me proud.”

Martin said it like she had no other choice.

** ** *

Barker liked to use the cattle prod when it was his turn to tuck her in at night. Animosity for the little slip when she manifested completely never quite went away.

So he’d give orders and jab her for not moving quick enough. In her side or on her thighs. Today he was insatiable because the belt came off.

“Naughty little girl, you do this to me, you know. Females always have an effect and you’re a toxin.”

She refused a chocolate from his hand. Tried to bite him when it was forced. That’s why he beat her today. It was rude. There was always some watered down reason. His huge palm smashed her face into the bed. Six swats on her bare bottom until it near bled.

“Fix yourself and who will you tell?”

“N-No one.” She covered her mouth. Didn’t allow him the pleasure of her cries. Cool air kissed the hot flesh. She tugged her panties back up and burrowed under covers. Wondered what Marti was up to instead. Detachment was her friend.

“You should have taken the chocolate, Lucy.”

The pain didn’t register here. She imagined herself floating in a tank where there was nothing. A big, wide nothing. Barker turned his nose up.

“You’re disgusting. You do this to us and you won’t stop. God damn whore.”

“Dr. Barker.” Nolan appeared as if on cue. It was so fucking annoying. This trade off. “I think I have things from here.” Lucy pushed her fist up to her mouth. Wiped her eyes and stared at the wall. Heard the footsteps leave before Nolan came close and a lock clicked.

That sound brought her head up, but he turned the lights down.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re crying.” Nolan sat upon her bed. Smoothed hair aside so she faced away. “Did he hurt you again?”

“No.” She swallowed. Heard a scoff. He rubbed her back in a way that was supposed to soothe. All she heard was that key locking the door.

“Where does it hurt, Lucy? I could make it feel better.” He pulled her blanket down. “You must be tired. Making the world feel things. Is there anything left for you to feel too?”

That sentiment made her start crying. She wasn’t exactly sure why. Muffled sounds into her pillow as she clung.

Nolan held her until she wiggled again because he smelt like mold.

“Look at all this work. Barker’s really breaking you in. We can’t have that. You’re mine.” Nolan got her gown up to see the welts. Fingers tugged her underwear down. “What’d you do this time, Lucy?”

“Don’t.” Lucy jerked her head up. Petrified while his hand pressed down on her back. The weight of it was a bag of stones.

“Don’t, what?” Nolan eased. “I’m just making you feel better.”

“Don’t.” She repeated with no words of explanation to follow.

A rubber glove snapped off and his dry, cold hand touched her hip.

Massaged the skin there.

“You’re so fucking ungrateful.” He hissed in her ear at the silent, stiff protests. “Stop moving.”

She obeyed. As if it would help something. As if it would allow her to sink down into the mattress and through the floors until she reached hell.

Oh, I’m already here.

“I’m just going to make you feel something.” Nolan sighed. “You want to feel it, don’t you?”

“No.” Lucy burst. Hands pushed against her chest. If she could reach inside her ribs to give her own heart a squeeze, she would have.

His hand came up and then she felt it again somewhere else. For a moment, it was unreal. Like it wasn't really happening to her. This was a bad dream. A chorus twisted together. The sharp buzz of a cattle prod. A shot echoing into a skull. Flowers dying. That lost mother wolf bowing her head. Were these all death rattles?

Nolan decided he was done feeling and got up, breaths quickened.

“Do you feel better after that?”

Lucy curled herself up, shaking so hard she might have shattered. Eyes wide on the wall.

“No.”

“Too bad. We’ll try again another time.”

A dam burst.

“You *can’t*.”

"I can't?"

Brown eyes blinked when the nerve returned.

"You can't...make me feel anything." She lifted her head to see him. Eyes glinting in the dim light. Nolan was caught. "All this pining to impress him. Brenner thinks you're pathetic, I heard him talking about it. I'm all he thinks about. You're one step away from a measly desk job. Did you know that? Did you know that no one loves you? No one thinks highly of you, you're a...a fucking joke. And you reek of insecurity. I can't stand the stench of you!"

Nolan slapped her with his wet hand. So hard that her head made a dull sound against the metal bed rail.

"Shit." He saw her go limp briefly and pulled her up. "I didn't mean that." *I'm just crazy about you, sugar baby.*

"This place." Lucy touched the sore spot on her head. "It needs me more than it needs you and you can't stand that."

"And you're not wishing yourself out. Come on, Lucy, manipulate me. Fill me with poison." He dragged her up by the hair. "You can't because you know your place. You're too frightened."

"I can wait," she wheezed, "until you feel safe first." Until he was hopeful.

"You need my friendship, little one. This place is going to swallow you."

"It's digesting all of us." She curled up into the tiniest ball she could. Nolan opened the door. *It's going to choke on me someday.* A slam and he was gone.

** **

"Lucy." Logan tried that next day. She just stared at his hands. At the clean paper between them. So, he wrote.

Talk to me. His eyes pleaded and she didn't move. Just looked like nothing was holding her in place.

"Lucy, did something happen?"

"I'm sorry, can I lie down here?" She was already up and curling on

her side in a beaten up, green chaise lounge. "I can't sit." It hurt.

"Lucy?" Logan pulled the chair up to sit with her. A safe distance away.

"Did your parents ever hit you?" She sniffed.

"Once. I ran away and they were terrified. My mom gave me one hard rap on my ass and cried later about it. She wasn't much of a crier."

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen."

"Why did you run away?"

"I saw my family do something they shouldn't have." He clasped his hands together and leaned over on his knees to watch the back of her skull. "So, I ran."

"Because of what they did or because they weren't who you thought they were?"

"Both." Logan caught a two pronged welt on her inner thigh as she shifted. More red swatches that rode up. "Who did that?"

"Do you want to see them, Dr. Myers? See how I've suffered and live through it?" She reached to bring the gown up. A hand shot out. Curled their fingers together.

"I don't need to see it." Logan offered when her eyes snapped to his. "I believe you." She pulled from him.

"I can't sit right. Can I just lie here?"

"Yes." Logan gave her some peace of mind. Went to his desk. Didn't try to be her friend or kick her back out where they'd prod. They knew his office was bugged and Brenner would hear that someone went too far with his girl. She listened to a pencil scratching and exhaled.

“Do you forgive your family?”

“No, I don’t.”

“If the tables were turned and you were bad,” she began, “could you face them again? I’m not sure I could face mine. Not as I am.”

“What are you now?” Logan asked as she traced over a crack in the pleather.

“I’m not sure anymore.” She rose when the door opened. Brenner with his hands clasped.

“You don’t mind if I sweep Lucy away early, do you?” He already had her by the hand. Logan couldn’t get a word in per the usual as she was whisked off.

“Martin.”

“Be silent until we’re alone. I’d prefer that.” He uttered. They went up to his office. One hand wrapped around Lucy’s elbow. That door locked and she flinched out of habit. “You’ve been holding out on me.”

“Do you listen to all our sessions?”

“Not all, it’s usually Connie. Won’t you sit down?”

“I’d rather stand.” Lucy held herself so he came to her.

“You didn’t come to Nolan or I about this.”

“I figured you were fine with it.” She cringed when Martin grasped her arms.

“I’m not going to hit you. You only get discipline when you’re bad. You haven’t been bad, have you?” Brenner came to her eye level to make his point. “You believe it’s my wish for you to be harmed under my care without reason. Is that it?”

“No.” It was choked out.

“Bend over the desk. Show me.”

“I’m fine. I don’t-”

“Lift up your gown.” Each word hit harder. “I’ll step back. I won’t even touch you.” She trembled there under the florescent lights. Wished to go back into her chrysalis and never come out. Lucy bent over. Sniffled harder then pulled her dress and cardigan up. “Underwear too. I won’t touch you.” His voice wrapped around her neck. Squeezed. Fabric rustled and a *tsk* sighed. “Barker? He wasn’t pleased being apart of the experiment. And I so hoped he’d get over it.”

She didn’t move to fix herself. Not until bid.

“Lucy, was it Barker?” Martin pressed. “Say it.”

“Yes. It was Barker. Just Barker.”

“Belt and cattle prod it looks. One went missing. They’re not allowed out of their restricted areas. This is such a pity.”

A sob choked. She didn’t tell him about Nolan. Fear did keep that down. Maybe a little drive to keep some good old testament revenge to herself.

“Cover yourself. It’s going to be alright.” He waved his hand so she hurried. “Is it appropriate if I hold you? I hate to see you cry.” Lucy just crumbled there in front of his desk. The word *yes* didn’t come, but a nod was quicker. It made her feel sick. Him bringing her close. Giving her affection like it was a treat for a good dog who’d mastered a new trick.

Sicker that she craved it after these endless months. She hated him and begged every time. Promised she’d be good and docile if only he kissed her head and held her close. Because that was still better.

“Lucy. Stop crying.” It was a pointed command that quieted the whimpering. She clung to his arm. Let Brenner sweep hair aside before he took her chin.

“Do you want to push back?” Blue eyes flickered. “Yes or no?”

If they could push, why not I?

“Yes.” She scraped that word harshly into glass.

“Here’s what we’re going to do.” Brenner cupped her face, thumbed a tear aside. “I want you to have a nice, long shower. Pamper yourself. We’ll set out some clothing for you. And they’ll lead you to the atrium. There’s going to be something for you there. Something special. I’ll even play a song for the occasion. What do you like?”

“I like...” She blinked. “*Ave Maria*.”

“What a beautiful choice.” Martin pulled Lucy to her feet. Took her shoulders to kiss her head. “Off you go.”

“Alright.” Breathless, she turned and stilled. “Amanda. Was she a good mother?”

A beat of Brenner’s pointed eyes.

“She did her best.”

The door shut on her.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks all for reading :) feel free to stay and chat

6. Lights, Camera, Action

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all! It has been a bad day so pushing a chapter out to bring me up! Lucy gets a difficult offer from Brenner and sees the outside world for the first time in months.

TW: Abuse, torture, and death due to Lucy's abilities. Misogyny. Sexual references. Brenner is his own warning.

1965

"You look rested for once." Connie observed. It was something close to a compliment. "Are you any good with makeup or is that a pointless question?"

"The basics. My mother and sister taught me." Lucy stood there wrapped in a towel. "Why...the makeup?"

"Won't it be nice to look grown up for once? You shuffle like a child." Connie was setting things in a line. Even put a lipstick down. "We haven't got all day. There are clothes on the bed. Washed for you. Put them on, sizes should be correct. You're a tiny thing."

A woman's dress. Embroidered white fabric. Flowing with a thin circle skirt you could still see the shape of her legs through. Something fashion forward a celebrity would wear on the red carpet. Tight in the waist and bust. Long pillowy sleeves that were snug along her wrists.

"It's pretty." Lucy had her hand smacked for fiddling with the sleeve buttons. "Did you pick it?" She knew the answer.

"Dr. Brenner did."

"Oh."

"You ought to cut this mess off sometime soon." Connie grasped for

her hair. Pulled. "Don't suppose you can style it."

"...No, ma'am." Lucy winced as she tugged and teased her hair up. Huge, full waves and rings she couldn't stop shaking about. Big eyes watched red lipstick slide over flesh. A makeover for a day like Cinderella. Connie stepped in again to hurry her.

"They may call you a siren, but you're a damn flounder. You're not doing other women any favors being this shy." She huffed and rolled her eyes. Actual amusement flickered in Lucy's expression. "Wide eyed little doe. You can play that act up and be ahead, you realize that?"

"I'm sorry, I'm being..." The correct word didn't come so she muttered. "...stupid."

Connie turned Lucy around and struck her. Not hard enough to draw a cry but swift enough to make a point of it. A hand jumped to the hot skin. The hairbrush wagged at her face.

"Don't call yourself stupid again." Connie had a fierce look as she said this. Hands pushed her back toward the mirror. Lucy blinked, swallowing before she nodded. Another switch flipped. "They forgot shoes so your old ones will just have to do. Put them on, don't make me wait longer."

Even undergarments were picked with stockings and garters. Lucy couldn't remember the last time she'd worn jeans. Sweats. The saddle shoes were an odd source of comfort. One dash of her old self here in this dead woman's body. This movie star set and ready for her close up.

Last thing she grabbed was Kristen's ring sitting on her bedside table. Tucked it into the bra.

Connie led her down the hallway to the atrium. Felt like the entire lab lined the walls and buzzed around as little work bees.

All for her.

"Ah, finally." Brenner came out from a conversation fixing his cufflinks. Watched Lucy hide behind Connie in response. He stood

above them on the second floor. Eyes intent as he rounded toward the steps. One wave and Connie disappeared, leaving Lucy exposed there. "You look wonderful."

"Thank you." Lucy swallowed, eyes darting around as men roamed. Brenner settled a hand in his pocket to observe her.

"Still trying to hide and shuffle. You look small and frightened. Like you're at a disadvantage." He began in deep thought. Lucy just watched on, idly squared her shoulders. "Do you know why you feel that way, even now?"

A nod for her to speak.

"Because I don't know what's going on."

"Always enter a room as if you do." Brenner sighed, head shaking to correct her. "It's actually because you're standing below me, dear."

So, remedy that.

This hour, he asked her to be equal. To feel it in her bones.

Lucy knew it had an expiration date. Brenner's affection always did.

Undaunted in her dress, she put one foot on the first step. And when that didn't burn, Lucy climbed up toward him with steady eyes. Brenner appeared all too pleased. She smelled *Colonia* and aftershave on his skin and stepped up right next to him with her back to everything else below.

"There's one last thing. They forgot something for you and I corrected it."

Brenner would make her perfect. A vision. All by his design. She felt briefly she was created in his image with no family to speak of. No hand-me-downs. Not patchwork. Instead spun from fine silk and draped over hot flesh. Slick and cool between thighs.

Lucy thought of brush strokes along her skin. Saw herself fleshy and twisted in a pair of bulging, muscled arms. Hair fanned out.

Silent screams. Transformation.

Hands plucked up a shoe box. Something designer like her sister would cut out of a magazine and tape to her wall of fashion and celebrities. Cherry red to match her lipstick. Ruby slippers for a journey down the yellow brick road.

Martin did something that shocked her. Knelt down as one would do to propose. Took Lucy by the ankle to toss her sister's saddle shoes aside.

"Let it rot, Lucy." *For me.*

His head rose while he guided her stocking clad feet into the heels. A thin strap lined the top of the foot to meet the clasp at her ankle. She felt a breath catch while he touched her, eyes lifting because it was too much. They were both acutely aware of hearts picking up a rhythm. Of the fact that something sinful built and burned. All tender and gentle fingers today, Brenner took her hand once she was in them. Felt her wobble and sway so he steadied her.

Metamorphosis.

"You'll get used to this." He came up and smiled. "Now. Would you like your present?"

"These weren't the present, Martin?" Brown eyes batted with a monotone, her default these days.

"Oh, no." He brought Lucy to the railing, settled her hand upon the cool metal. "Below. Our growing operation. You're the first of many great products. If only we could bottle you like perfume."

Lucy laughed a breathless sound at his joke and he appreciated that. She was so far gone and willing to dive deeper. Willing to reach back into the great unknown and pull those threads forth. Subject Zero. Sometimes her tattoo brand twitched as a reminder that she was an object of curiosity and wonder.

Brenner stood behind her with a palm against her back. Almost searching for the device to puppet her with. How he longed to preserve her in glass. A sleeping Snow White. To look through a

crystalline frame and admire what she's become. But, what she would do next was too important.

"See him there among the weeds? Barker." Yes, she spotted him not too far from her, looking exceptionally average. Mulling over a file put into his hand. Clearly distracted.

"I see him."

"Can you touch him from up here?" Brenner wondered aloud in Lucy's ear as she stared. "Zero in on him and only him like you're able to with the rats and wolves. Make him feel deep and endlessly without leaking to harm the others." *Violate him.*

"Others." She realized, turning to see his eyes glint. "You want me to-?"

"You're going to kill him. Plain and simple. As he stands." Martin tapped her chin. "However you like. I do believe you're a creative girl. That's the gift, you do whatever you wish. Sort of like making your own film instead of starring in one. Push."

Lucy stared back down at Barker.

"Oh, and do it slowly." He'd added. Connie was across the way watching too. "Put on a show of it. Demonstrate to the others. Feel it out. Not to worry, they all know the drill except him." It was true. Lucy smelt a twinge of anticipation and surprise from the crop. Campfire and fresh cut grass respectively. Her lips parted.

"And just know, if you don't want to kill him. You don't have to. Connie has a loaded gun and she's ready and willing to take the shot for you. *From you.*" Martin sealed her fate somehow with that. A choice he knew she'd make.

Funny thing about Martin Brenner was his way of leaving nothing to chance. Once you get skilled at manipulating and predicting the human condition, it leaves almost nothing to a fate of surprise. Lucy would learn this too.

"Remember," Martin tucked strands of hair away, "it's truly my last wish to make you do something uncomfortable. The things I'll ask of

you, just know I sometimes hate myself for it. I know I ask too much."

"I remember." Lucy droned quietly. "If I kill him, you'll get another with more belts and cattle prods. Another who will feed me candies and tou-... This'll never end, Martin. The cast will just rearrange around me." The shining star.

"And?"

"And, I don't care anymore." Lucy mourned a girl with fire who just wanted to climb trees. That girl rotted the second she set foot into Brenner's office. Used until nothing was left over. A tearful scoff before a change in tone. "Your mother, Amanda, did she love you to the moon and back?"

For a moment, she just heard him breathe.

"With everything she had inside her."

Sound cut into her as he fixed a record to let *Ave Maria* play. Many stopped to hear the beauty of it in wonder.

And Barker began to laugh down below. Sweet, citrus laughter. Lucy sniffled blood and watched him cackle until those around him began to step away. Until he was red then blue in the face. Looking up at her because he *knew*. She only inhaled deeper. Eyes rolled back to close for the fragrant aromas.

"Not what I thought you would go with." Martin observed.

"Oh. I just wanted to see if I could smell it." Lucy slipped into her vast dreams.

"Smell, what?"

"His genuine fear under my artificial emotions." Lucy gripped the bars with both hands. This is something she'd remember down the line. "And I can. It's just so tart. I can taste it spreading along my tongue and down my throat."

"Almost wish I could indulge as well." It was methodical, the way

he uttered that.

"I know you do." Lucy's tone tapered off.

Barker knew what was happening to him, clawing and laughing like a mad clown. The awareness of it made the horror grow evermore. Scientists all backed further and further away. Clear instructions given by Brenner himself.

They let him die.

Martin Brenner got his wish too. Displaying Lucy so they all knew what happens to traitors and rule breakers. Eyes peeled Lucy's flesh from bones and she pushed harder. A change and Barker's tears of glee became blubbering.

"May I get closer?"

"You may." Brenner stepped aside and she turned stiffly. Heels clicked slow and steady down the stairs. Unable to break from the scene, Lucy was mesmerized. She willed this and the world bowed over for her. It was wrong, she figured, to take nourishment in it.

When you have an illness that rips the agency of your body away, it's only natural to seek it elsewhere.

One hand fisted her skirts up. Closer and closer while Barker writhed there on the floor. A full tantrum.

He cried like a baby. Despair and hopelessness. She shed his anger and made him rot. Until he was bashing his face into the floor to make it all go away. Pure hysteria. Colors and smells overlapped. Wrung together. Her mouth opened, eyes wide and unable to blink.

Lucy stopped breathing there. Held it to focus. Blood flowed freely into her dress. Pity about that.

Sinking to the floor, she pressed her clammy hands to the metal and concrete. Tilting her head, a universal sort of motion for one sentiment. *Fascinating*.

She gripped the dress tight and about twisted his bleeding head like

a doll until something popped. Glass smashed from a nearby beaker. One shard gleamed and then...

A series of wet squelches.

The tune swirled around her frame. Cries echoed and blood began to pool so Lucy backed up and away from it. Bumped into Martin's chest as he'd followed her down. Hands went around her elbows. Made her keep watching so she did. Feeling his heart thud against her spine.

She imagined herself in a dream. Dancing like Ginger Rogers until her poor feet bled. Skirts high with every kick and twirl. Men spinning her around. Her father. The damn Loomis kid. Logan. Nolan. Brenner. Even Jim.

Jim. She wondered about him more often than she should have. How he made her smile there in the wind. Like things might work out okay.

But, few things were okay and for once, she accepted that. Brenner consumed her until a pit remained. Until she was just another violent painting her mother would study. A woman made a symbol by force because a man in power set his eyes upon her and thought, *that's mine.*

A body hit metal at the same time Lucy collapsed into Brenner's arms because she'd pushed too hard. She no longer heard the chaos. Only the sweet keys of *Ave Maria.*

"Lucy," Martin cupped her jaw, "are you here with me?"

Darkening eyed opened.

"What did she smell like? Amanda." She pulled for Martin's jacket and let him cradle her there. Spine curving elegantly into him while her dress fanned out. A perfect shot for the cameras, she thought.

"Jasmine." He said without thinking because the memory of scent was a stark thing. Easy to take you back through time. "You've got blood all down your dress." Lucy tasted it on plush lips already, eyes shifted to catch a glimpse of Barker face down there in the center of

the room.

"How?" He continued. "What did you fill him with?"

"I couldn't decide. Nothing, at first." She peered back up at Brenner and imagined red velvet curtains closing. "And then *everything*. All at once." His thumb drew a circle into her cheekbone. Agents closed in to assist, treading carefully.

"You were perfect."

Had Lucy been standing, great wings would have uncurled from her back. Martin might have handed her a bouquet of red dahlias and asked her to bow. Stage lights blinding until nothing remained.

She would not be the first successful numbered experiment, the same way Barker would not be her first victim. Had she been bottled, Martin Brenner surely would have worn her upon his neck and wrists. Gone and tangled in red thread, she smiled her drunken smile. Appeased him because it was the only thing that made her feel real.

"I was perfect."

** *** **

1982

Lucy Garland liked her job.

Liked spending hours in a cold, well ventilated room with cosmetics and chemicals. Cutting and snipping away. Stitching and molding. Gary from at the coroner's office never made too much of a mess for her to clean when cold bodies were wheeled in after their autopsies. And Hawkins itself hid its violent side so the corpses that came through where mostly old and natural in death.

She thought of herself as a doll maker or someone who conserves art. Tarnished forms in need of restoration. Taking them apart. Piece by piece. Stitching them back together. Polishing and painting them up for display behind glass. She could close her eyes and imagine herself on the table. The process was a clean cut routine too, that was a bonus. The clockwork of it all.

There was no judgment from them. They trusted Lucy would take the upmost care so the funeral directors could send them off right. Elder couple who ran the place, practically attached to the county coroner's office. Huge cemetery behind the lot. Wife and husband with no children who took Lucy in to teach her the art of restoration.

They'd buried her parents too, it was an intimate bond they shared.

Not the ghastly grey ghouls we saw in cinema. But, a loving couple who kept the family business and dreamed of making the process of death and loss easier. Beverly and Frank Crawford, slice of life types with a job that might frighten others off.

"Lucy? They brought the dress for Mrs. Nash." A door slid open. Beverly covered her lips and nose with the same mask Lucy donned. Removed a sheer shawl from her shoulders. One of many she always wore. "Too early?"

"No, I'm about ready to change her." Lucy moved around with her hair pinned back. Black rubber gloves and matching apron. A divine instrumental played behind her. "I was thinking this color, we're almost out."

"I have more supplies on the way this week." Beverly leaned over, adjusting the lamp. A vibrant woman, Stunning brown skin and eyes. A beauty mark on the apple of her cheek. Gorgeous. "Color should be just perfect. Frank tells me the family wants to see her before they decide on an open casket. Grandson is still processing. I think your work will sway them toward open.

"Thank you." It meant a lot to hear.

"Need help with the change?"

"No, she's small, I have it from here."

"Bev, we have a new appointment," Frank smiled in the doorway. Easygoing man who never wore his glasses when he should have because he was always losing them. Round with a fondness for twill suits and his wife. "Lucy, feeling alright?"

"Yes, thank you, much better now. Didn't eat enough at breakfast."

“Need a break, let us know.” He kissed his wife on her way out after she left a taupe floral dress hung up. The door shut so Lucy could finish her work. Rubber snapped off after the clothing and cosmetics were applied. She leaned in close to ensure it was just as she wanted. Head tilting. Fascinating.

“You’re perfect.”

** ** *

1965

The sequel was supposed to be better than the original and it rarely was. Maybe it was just a difficult thing to capture the spirit of a beloved classic.

Maybe one wrong choice ruined the entire piece.

Lucy was blindfolded then led to the second row of a van. Handcuffs snapped and Nolan seat belted her in. Row in front of them stayed empty while Brenner and Connie got in driver and passenger seats. Connie revved the engine and other cars followed far behind. Casual and disguised like them.

“Lucy, behave yourself. Mr. Creed’s been instructed to administer punishment if you act out.” Brenner shut a metal door, leaving them alone. Boxed into metal. Like cargo.

“Where am I going?”

“It won’t matter, you’re going outside.” Nolan shifted to take her blindfold away. She couldn’t see much with curtains blocking her view. “This test is everything for you.”

“How’s that?” She refused to look at him. Dressed up again and ready to shoot.

Nolan played with a button on her coat. Opened it.

“You know, if you perform well. Brenner will allow you out.”

“I’ll never leave that place.”

"You're one of them now. Grown up. Maybe not an agent like Connie, but something important. Nonetheless. An asset." *Unlike him.*

"And where will I go?"

"Somewhere close by. They'll set you up for life as long as you submit to your due diligence." He said. Another button undone and the rest went. "Might even give you a husband to watch over you. If you're good, it could be someone kind."

"Talking about yourself, Nolan?" She replied with no emotion to trace. Just felt the gentle rocking of the vehicle.

"Why not me? I've been nothing but *giving*." Fingers crept under the skirt causing her to twist and squirm away.

"You can't here." She shuddered and jerked.

"Haven't heard many complaints. You didn't tell him. Maybe you enjoy it, Lucy." His rough voice edged with a warning until her eyes shut tight. The hand squeezing her leg left it abruptly. "Little stupid bitch in heat, I will get what I'm due too."

"I'm not stupid." Lucy muttered through teeth. Quiet but bold enough.

"I've put too much work into this. Come far with this lab."

Brown eyes slid to see him. Sharp and bold.

"Yes. You will. When you finally get on Brenner's good side." *Whoops*. It was a sore spot.

Nolan pressed a taser into her inner thigh and struck. Lucy convulsed so hard, she bashed her head into metal and sunk down. Out like a light.

** ** *

A hard slap clashed Lucy back awake. Thudding head tried to piece the world back together. Connie hit her again. Not as hard as Barker, but she made her point as she always did.

"Oh, wake up, will you!"

"Not too hard, you'll make a mess of her." Brenner sighed, arms crossing. "Mr. Creed already gave it a start. I'm quite tired of this."

Shame etched. Fuck. He always seemed to make things worse with Dr. Brenner.

"Apologies, I may have been too forward. She fought. Poor thing, hit her head. Lu-Zero, are you with us?" Nolan dotted on her, hands cupping her cheeks.

"Finish getting her ready. I'll meet you three up there. Lucy, do as you're bid." Cold this morning, Martin got out and fixed his jacket. Connie was pulling black hair up, twisting and pinning painfully. Lucy moaned to herself and blinked until the world wasn't fuzzy.

"Drink the juice, you'll feel better." Nolan choked her with it. Held a towel so she wasn't spilling.

"This'll do for now." Connie pinned a blonde wig on her. Fixed it with quick hands. Pushed sunglasses on Lucy's face. "Now, Zero, we're going to uncuff you and walk you outside. You stay quiet. Stay with us. Or you'll be hurt. Our people are everywhere. Don't you make it worse on yourself."

"What's happening?" Lucy lulled around as Nolan took the cuffs off her.

"You will walk across the street right to Dr. Brenner. Sit on the bench with him and do nothing else. Do you understand? We're trusting you to behave."

Another test. Don't run.

"Yes," she swallowed, "I understand."

"Come on. Creed, you know your position. Beat it." Connie pulled Lucy up and brushed her off. Got her out into the light. Fall colors and wind. Grey clouds. Lucy's breath was lost. Something ethereal about it all. "Hurry up." The snap got her stumbling in her ruby slippers. Alleyway between two brick buildings. City she couldn't

place.

“Where are we?”

“That doesn’t matter to you.” Connie let her arm go. “Walk normal.” Down a street full of people she could have screamed at. It was too much at first. All these scents crawling over her.

“I think I might be sick.”

“Swallow that back down, I swear to god.” Connie trudged onward.

“Why are they calling me Zero now? Martin doesn’t.”

“His instruction. He prefers it from handlers.” Connie stopped at the crosswalk. “You see him in the park there?”

“Yes,” Lucy caught a flash of his back turned. Unworried. Sitting on a park bench reading the paper. Looked so normal too.

“Go to him and sit down. Any ideas otherwise will be punished. He has your instructions.” Connie put her hands in her pockets and the light changed. Lucy peered around and stepped out alone. Tried to steady her footing and lungs. She could have run and screamed her throat bloody.

But, she walked in a trance. Ignored anyone who glanced at her pleading. Shook until she touched Martin’s shoulder as if to keep herself grounded. What pained her is that was her time alone and she loathed it. Too conditioned to all the prodding. Fingers curled into his coat.

“What a good girl, you are. Please sit with me.” His brown hair shifted, one hand gave the bench a subtle pat.

“I can’t breathe.” Lucy welled behind her glasses and plopped down. Above them, one shiny red kite rose against wind. A stark warning underscored by child’s laughter. “I feel sick.”

“Yes, I imagine you’re overwhelmed.” Brenner touched her knee. “Breathe deeper. In your nose and out your mouth. Atta girl. I’m here. You and I are a team, Lucy, we’re in this together now.”

It hurt. His comfort harmed and healed all at once. Made her a tether to this world.

“Sit back, ankles crossed. Relax.” Brenner clasped his hands and sat next to her there. Looked out at the trees and grass. Families, runners, children, and dogs. Every which direction. Small river where ducks swam along. “Do you like it here?”

Lucy blinked.

“I really do.”

There was a beat of him folding the newspaper aside. Lucy peered out from behind her sunglasses.

“What you did with Barker. The others. You’re going to do it again. Only quicker this time.”

And she had no choice.

“We had a leak. In our lab. Someone left us and they’re trying to make waves. Should have run. Thinking we wouldn’t find out about it. People feel too secure these days in betrayal. We can’t have that. You understand?” Brenner turned to see her eyes. He stopped only to tuck a short piece of synthetic hair away. “You’re one of us now, Lucy. And you are going to protect our best interests. Because they’re *your* interests too now. This operation is bigger than you’ll ever know. Look around us.”

She did. Flickers of civilians pausing to see them. Runners. Mothers with strollers. Gardeners. Men walking dogs. Even a man up high fixing a street light. All from that place. All in on the greatest practical joke known to mankind. Or not known yet.

“Yes, we have eyes on every dark corner. You see now?”

“Who...Who do I need to...?”

“His name is Bob Uris. See him there by the water? Brown hair, mustache, green plaid.” Brenner watched Lucy search and spot him there tossing a hot dog wrapper out. “Do it.”

“Now?”

“No time like the present.” Brenner opened his paper again, shrugging before he found an article. His mistake because she caught the paper’s title and date. November. How the months passed. Her family would be prepping for Thanksgiving now.

Lucy also caught the nearby city. Arlington, Indiana. Swallowing, she peered away.

“Hurry it up, we have a lot to do this morning.” Brenner read to himself. Lucy saw the man again. Crossing to his wife on a picnic blanket. A small brunette boy teetered over to see him and Lucy’s heart sank.

“He’s with his family. They’re having lunch together.”

“And if you don’t kill him, we’ll have to visit him while he’s at home...with his family. You’re actually sparing a few lives.”

“I can’t, Martin. I can’t do it. Please.”

“Don’t make this uglier than it needs to be, Lucy.” He curled a hand around her wrist. Met her eyes. “You know, we could visit your family at home too. Your darling sister. The nurse.”

“She’s a doctor.” Lucy knew she’d pay for that outburst later. Brenner’s heated stare penetrated.

“Your mother was special too, like you. Maybe she’d fair better here.”

“You can’t.” A gasp hitched and his hand squeezed. Tears rolled down from under the large sunglasses to dry crisp. Dress and coat shifting into cold wind.

“Can’t I? Have you not figured out how this works, Lucy dear.” Martin pressed a smirk at her. “We’re fighting the bad guys. You’re going to do every single thing you’re told. And upon you, we’ll build a better world. We need you. You’re going to protect the interests of Hawkins Lab for the rest of your life. So, do it. Or his family and yours will pay. I know I’m asking the world of you, but you’re strong

enough to take it now.”

His hand moved as if to console, warm upon her shoulder.

Lucy stared at him. Death rotting. Bob Uris was already standing. Smile fading to nothing. His son's hand slipping from his. Blood sniffled up Lucy's nose.

Hopeless.

Hopeless.

“Honey, where you going?” Mrs. Uris had called with a grin. Lucy looked up at the red kite again shuddering.

Mr. Uris ran. A sudden shift of feet toward the road full of cars. Lucy stared into Brenner's eyes. Didn't cringe when a crash impacted. When glass shattered and a scream of agony howled toward the sky. Several cars smashed into a sputtering bus. Blood and parts skidded all over the road.

And then nothing.

“Don't look. Just look at me, Lucy. There's my girl. I'm so proud of you.” Martin Brenner found peace in this. Pulling her up. “How horrible.” Civilians raced all directions. Lucy was urged into the chaos. Over the sounds of sirens. “Come, we'll meet them at the pick up.” An arm went around her. Running off into the sunset together. Clothes fluttering. Down one alley and out another where it was quieter.

Brenner puffed, looked around before he took her hand to tug.

“Come, few blocks down from here.”

Few blocks to handcuffs and needles. Cattle prods, dark rooms, and Nolan Creed's fingers. Lucy stopped crying awhile ago. Just breathed and heard her heart thump.

They sped through city streets, wind blowing idle scraps of paper every which way. One block down. Two. Lucy skidded in her clacking heels as they passed a restaurant's back door. Thought about

all the mommies and daddies she'd be driving into traffic and shards of glass.

"Oh, my ankle." One knee hit the wet pavement. Hissing, Brenner huffed at her.

"Get out of that filth." He pulled harder.

"I twisted it," she whined and wobbled up only to stumble down. Wide eyed little doe.

She felt around while he looked up behind her to see if anyone else followed. But, they were utterly alone. Fear kept her from spreading her poison. Kept her from influencing this expensive suit. Dying it all sorts of colors.

"Martin." She shuddered innocently, finding a thick slab of porcelain.

"*What?*" He actually snapped it at her, whipping back to see haunted brown eyes when the sunglasses slipped off.

"You're not the son of a king." Lucy puffed and reeled forward to smash a dirty plate down into his hairline. Blood trickled from Brenner's temple. Hand ripping away before he crumbled backwards with no grace.

Lucy didn't wait to see if he was moving. She just ran awkwardly in her ruby slippers. Wishing the entire way. Slipping along brick buildings. Tripping out into the street. Clawing.

One chance. Arms lifted to wave a blue truck down.

"Please!" She found her voice and fight all at once. "Stop!" Rubber burned under the wheels. Not out of anger, but freedom. She clung to the truck, climbing to light. Out of this deep hole they'd dropped her in. Ripped and dirty clothing alerted the older man inside. "There's a bad man chasing me, please! Help me!"

"Shit, what the fuck?! Get in!" He heaved Lucy inside.

"Go! Drive! He's coming for me!"

A moment of silence as the engine charged them forward with the rest of the traffic. Rows of trees. Nothing behind her.

“Sweetheart, you gotta talk to me. What happened?” The man turned to touch her. Lucy jerked into a tiny ball. “I won’t hurt you. What happened back there?”

“A man...he hurt me. I just wanna go home. I have to go before they...”

“You need a hospital, missy.”

“No!” She heaved. “I need to go home. Hawkins. Do you know Hawkins? It’s only-”

“You’re sure you don’t want to call the police?”

“They can’t help me.” Lucy curled up in a blanket he pulled from behind him. Shaking too hard to function correctly as the massive truck rocked back and forth. Kristen’s ring gleamed on her finger. “I have to help myself.”

** ** *

1982

The hustle and bustle of Main Street during summer was a welcomed change. Lucy smelt the thrill of burning rubber at the same time a pay phone slammed down. Joyce Byers smoking a cigarette and furious, shaking her brown hair out wearing a blue uniform shirt.

“Joyce, you alright?” Lucy almost left her to her anger but stopped because they locked eyes. Joyce’s hand was shaking before another puff wafted smoke. “Lonnie again?”

It was the talk of the town. The issues in the Byers’ home. Lonnie spent most of his time in bars either way and Lucy didn’t indulge in the talk, but saw Joyce enough to hear it straight from her.

“Can’t be bothered to pick Will up tonight at the Wheeler’s with me here late. I can’t get him a bike until Christmas.”

“Need me to get him? I’m supposed to make a hair appointment with Karen, she’s been asking me about it. It’d be no trouble.” Lucy tried to make it casual as Joyce always refused.

“No, I’ll call Jonathan, he’ll leave work early.” Joyce was lighting another cigarette. Shaking so hard, that Lucy cupped her palms so the wind couldn’t blow it out. “Thanks.” She blew away the opposite way. “Lucky, you never picked these up.”

“Ah, my mom found me smoking one under our treehouse when I was fourteen and...the talk we had persuaded me to never pick one up again.” The joke made Joyce twitch the slightest smile. Joyce Byers was in the same classes as Mia and Jim. She wasn’t particularly close with Mia Garland, they did a few projects together in school.

But, the mother was gaining a crazy label and Lucy could understand that much.

“Break’s almost up.” Joyce checked her watch and huffed.

“I don’t mind to pick Will up, he’s a good kid.” Lucy held her purse to herself.

“I appreciate that, I think I need to do this myself. Lonnie and I...we...” She licked her lips. “We’ve been over a long time....”

She had to save herself.

“...and what happened last month, it still haunts me. You know?”

“I’m sure.” Lucy offered slower.

It was how she and Lucy got closer. Lonnie took Will with him into town, made a stop by a friend’s house. Twenty minutes tops.

Left sweet Will Byers in the car for three hours until the boy got out to wander up to the apartment building and find his dad. Lucy recognized him and pulled over on her way home from work. She’d helped bury both his grandparents so he knew her too. Called Joyce immediately.

Turns out Lonnie started drinking and gambling. Just forgot Will

was with him. His own son slipped his mind.

Joyce showed up. Screamed him out of the building after Lucy took Will into the video store across the way.

“Is your job hard?” Will piped up, scanning over the sci-fi films.

“Harder for the people that come in.” She’d said.

“Is it scary...you know? Working with dead people.”

“Sometimes.” Lucy smiled for him. They both pretended not to hear Joyce and Lonnie shouting across the street. “I just tell myself that they’re more scared of me.”

“Why’s that?” Will’s big eyes lifted, hiding how somber he was.

“They’re almost...crossing over into a new world. I’m sure it’s a little frightening. They might feel kind of lost and alone without their loved ones. Same way their loved ones miss them. So, I try to make them look nicer when they enter. Set out flowers and candles to follow home. Blinking safe lights. First impressions. I might be scared at first. I’m shy, but I think of them and overcome that shyness to get work done. Takes practice.”

Will chuckled a little at that.

“I guess that makes sense.”

Police sirens spun outside.

“They’re not going to be together after today. My parents.” Will came to the window. Saw Chief Hopper stepping out and tossing a cigarette aside to get between the couple with one hand on his belt. Few of his officers tried to help as Lonnie shouted and Joyce was pushed back from him.

Lonnie got into his car to screech off after spitting at Jim’s shoes. Flipped them off and shouted about pigs. Jim looked too hungover for this so he went to Joyce, talking her down in his gentle way. She only huffed and gestured to the movie store, fatigued against Jim’s truck.

Hopper crossed over and spotted them inside.

“Let’s go, you’ve had a long day.” Lucy touched Will’s shoulder so they could meet the Chief outside.

“Hey buddy, you doing alright?”

“Yeah.” Will gripped his backpack straps.

“Your mom’s gonna drive you home, okay?” Jim cocked his head and waited until Will hurried around him to pop a pill. The boy ran into Joyce’s arms and was led by an officer back to their car. “Lucy.”

“Chief.”

“Good you saw him, thanks for stopping.” Jim touched his hat and shifted his stance aside.

“I do what I can for friends.”

“Was it...that bad, you know, before I got back in '79?” He asked with a little reluctance.

“Not as loud a few years ago, but...I don’t know, Joyce is tougher than both of us.” She ghosted a smile and Jim shrugged, smirking to himself. “I imagine you have a report to write. See you around?”

“Yeah, I’ll be...at the Hideaway later.” *As always.* A clear hint. He rubbed the back of his neck and turned to go awkwardly. Lucy sighed out.

“Maybe I’ll stop by.”

Jim paused with a tilt of his head and kept walking.

And that sealed their fate.

*** ** ***

1965

“Stop, here, it’s here.” The street hadn’t changed beyond the color of fall leaves. The man, she learned his name was Jack Hoffman,

parked at the corner.

“Missy, are you-?”

“Yes, I just need to get home. Thank you, thank you so much. Drive away from here. Far away.” Lucy fell into the concrete and got up running. He heeded the warning. Smoke bloomed as he drove off. Aching, she pounded on the door.

“Mom! Dad! Please!” Sobbing already, she banged until the door jerked and Lucy fell into a pair of arms smelling of cinnamon lotion. That shattered her.

“Lucy, baby?” Olivia trembled and dipped to the floor with her daughter’s done up and filthy body. “Don! Don, get in here!”

“Lucy!” His cry carried before arms closed her in. Kissing and gripping her face to make sure it was her and this wasn’t a dream. The stupid wig was yanked off, pulling a million pins with it.

“We have to go. We have to get Mia. We have to run. They’ll come. I...ran away.” Lucy gulped on wet air. Feeling around for her parents to keep hugging them. Keep their lost affection in her orbit.

“Don, get your keys. Now.” Olivia pulled Lucy up. “I got you, I got you. Oh, my god. Lucy, it’s okay.”

“I did...bad things. I’m sorry. I couldn’t stop it. He made me do it.”

“Shh, I know, I know. We know...that place. We studied it. They have these people, these horrible people, everywhere. They threatened us, made up a story about you losing your mind and said if we didn’t go with it...” Olivia was crying, pulling her along. “Come on, get into the car and lie down. Don, hurry!”

“I got them,” he raced out with a pile of coats. “Mia.”

“We’ll go straight to her. Now, drive!” The car peeled out as Olivia turned to touch her daughter’s head. Covered in jackets, she curled up there in back. Twisted in a seat belt. “Stay down. We’re here. You’re okay... You’re safe now.”

Lucy took her mother's hand and kept it there to inhale the scent of her. It flooded the car. What she smelled over it was tart because not even Olivia Garland believed that they were safe. But, saying it a hundred times was the best she could do for her hurt daughter and right now, that was enough.

Notes for the Chapter:

Whew, thank you so much for reading. Chat with me below. :)

7. Angel Of Music

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello again! Definitely listened to Phantom writing this. I really can't write a fic without referencing an old french novel, can I?

TW: Death/funerals, hypoglycemia, & Brenner.

1965

Whoever wrote this screenplay clearly hated the heroine. If that's what she was now. Villain was also fair. Lucy had done horrible things and not even reached eighteen. Hawkins Lab stole choices before she could hope to make them.

The car rocked while her mother spoke in slow, soothing tones. Begging forgiveness for not being enough. Apologizing over and over again for holding her back.

Lucy's reply was all the same.

"You just loved me so much," she cried, "you didn't always know where to put it. But, I feel it now."

Olivia chanted it was no excuse. Fear controlled them all. Fear of losing a daughter she still lost.

And yet, all Lucy smelled was sweet and spicy cinnamon.

It still cast lines into her heart when Donald gasped out. When a screech roared.

"Liv! Oh god, Lucy!" The wheel jerked and Lucy might have screamed. Olivia's fingers crushed her hand. Metal crunched over and over again. Smoke billowed up before a cough roused Lucy tangled in coats and a seat belt.

She was upside down.

Another cough wracked her poor chest. Fingers and toes wiggled with little awareness. The endless fog rolled over sparking synapses.

“Lucy...” Olivia couldn’t quite lift her head so she just breathed. “Baby?”

“M-Mom. Dad?” Tugs chilled her bones apart. Fingers pawing and grasping at thin ankles. A mighty pull that yanked her over shattered glass and concrete. “Mama!”

“Don’t you move!” A grey suit touched a gun to her cheekbone. Lucy was shuddering too hard to scream or feel the pain of raw skin. All at once, she realized why she’d made it home first.

Because Hawkins Lab let it happen. They let her hope. Probably counted on it to orchestrate a grand finale.

“No, no, no!” Chants became hysterical. They dragged Lucy further from the crash into dirt. Her neck craned to see more suits swarming the car like hungry vultures. Aching for bones to pick flesh from. Voices overlapped.

“Driver’s dead, Doctor Brenner. From the impact.” Someone offered, so forward about it as if they’d just ordered lunch.

Donald’s head lulled back. Covered in too much blood to make out his handsome features. Lucy screamed at the gun before her. Wailed there and rocked herself. Patted her cheek.

Losing someone you love in this world. It was like the cord of a tightrope snapping and a great fall to nothing forever.

“What a shame.” Brenner emerged with a thick bandage upon his forehead and hands shoved in his pockets. “And the other one?”

“Still moving, doctor.”

Brenner looked into Lucy’s pleading eyes. Her hands grasped for his shoes aimlessly.

“Please, I’ll do anything.” She wept, blood dribbled from her lip so he came closer to let her pull for his coat. Pleading with a god of

death. "Anything. Please, Martin, save her! I won't run from you ever again, I promise. I won't...I won't run. I'll stay with you forever and ever."

"I believe you, my dear girl...I really do. Lucy, I'm deeply sorry." He cupped her jaw, thumb smoothing a dirty tear aside. His tone became something visceral she felt gouge to bone. "I don't want this kind of pain for you. I hope you believe that much. But, what people really love is a *sole* survivor." Martin lifted from her to turn aside.

"Mom?" Lucy turned to scramble up when a boot smashed her down. Steel toes squishing her into dirt like a bug. "Mama!"

"Lucy!" Her mother kept trying to wiggle out despite being too weak. "I'm here, sweetheart, mama's here. It's okay. We'll go hide together...in the treehouse like we used to. Mama loves you. You're going to be-" The choke of a big hand around her throat. One crack. Nothing. Just a snap and a fall.

"What a waste." Brenner's heels clicked.

Lucy looked near comatose there. Unable to process.

"And such a mess you've made, your poor parents. Perishing in a terrible wreck coming to pick their medicated daughter up after her break. I truly hope you don't blame yourself, we originally intended to fill the house with carbon monoxide. Frame your sister for her own break and have her take your beloved parents to heaven with her. This could bode better."

"Sir!" More choking when the hand that killed her mother picked up a shard of glass to carve his face up. Rot. Rot. Rot. "Stop her!"

"No, Lucy, clearly has something to say. Finish it, dear." Her hands were stretched out. Eyes darkening to crush the man herself. A *whizz* sent a dart into her stomach the moment the man collapsed in a pile of red. Brenner bent down to her.

"C-Can't move my body."

"That'll pass. We're going home now." Martin touched the spot on his head. "As ungrateful as this was. You passed, sweet girl. And your

prize is freedom. Exactly what you wanted.” He plucked a needle and plunged just enough to get a spurt of liquid before it was in her neck. A gentle hand cradled her face until it lulled to one side for a long sleep she didn't try to fight.

** *** **

A snap. A fall.

Wake up.

A gasp.

“Now, now, no sudden movements.” Brenner’s kind voice mused. Lucy only groaned into fluffed pillows. “You ruined your clothes. We changed you into something more familiar. Do you know where you are?”

Brown eyes cracked. Another moan because her head pounded. Every bone was drunken. But, she took in the four walls and inhaled sharper.

“H-Home. Home.”

“That’s right.”

Her parent’s bed. Tucked at the bottom was a quilt her grandmother made by hand. A Tree of Paradise pattern. They’d slept together almost thirty years in these walls under this quilt.

And it was cold.

“You’re home. A place you’re going to stay for...a long time. No need to thank me.”

She wanted to spit that she’d kill him and it never came.

“I forgive your little detour, frankly we were counting on it.” Brenner sighed. Curled a piece of her hair aside in his finger. Leaned in so close and comforted her because everything ached. “We’ll give you something for the pain once you earn it. You’re a little battered, but nothing time can’t fix.”

“Dad. Mom.” She breathed, feeling around aimlessly for them.

“I’ll bet they were good people. And they’ll get a good burial. We tweaked the story because you look like hell and we can’t waste anymore time. They died in a brutal crash and were survived by their youngest daughter. Strange and broken girl they plucked up. I’m sure that’ll inspire more sympathy and people don’t often know what to do with that kind of pity. They’ll bring you pies and casseroles and back off only to whisper behind your back.”

Martin was right about that.

“Mia.”

“Oh, I almost forgot, I’m so glad you brought it up. Connie, the other one.”

“Get inside.” A kick sent Mia Garland to the carpet.

“Marti.” Both were already weeping. “Mom and dad.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. We tried.” Mia was over her sister. Gathering her into her arms. Smelled like their mother.

“It’s my fault.”

“It’s not. It’s not. We’ll-”

“You see, Lucy, Mia and I had a long chat about where the future was going. And you’ve made it clear we cannot trust you. We need one thread. Something to help you recall where your loyalties stand. You’re going to stay right here. At home. You’re going to rejoin this world in our image. You’re going to do everything we tell you. And Mia, she’s coming to work for us. Arrangements have been made for an...extended stay.”

“No.” Lucy gripped Mia to her.

“They’ll hurt you.” Mia whispered.

“I can’t let them hurt you either. No!”

“Ah, ah. Hands.” It was sick because she jolted to put her hands down on the bedspread at Martin’s command. Mia noticed it too and that only sealed this fate. “Think of your sister as an insurance policy. For us. Me. This lab. If something happens to me, it’ll happen to her. If you step out of line again, she’ll pay. Just like your parents.”

“Please.” Lucy crumbled, holding too tight to Mia’s shirt.

“Don’t think the worst, dear, she’ll have a stable job. Food and housing. No cells. No punishment. Unless you both act out. She’ll be one of us too. We’ve needed a new nurse for awhile, have we not?” Martin beamed at that like he’d had the best idea.

“Doctor.” Both girls corrected. Brenner exhaled sharper. Connie smirked behind him, gun waving.

“See Artemisia home.” Brenner stepped aside.

“I love you so much.” Mia clung to her sister for as long as she could.

“I love you, please, don’t take her! I’m sorry! I’m s-so sorry!” Lucy pulled when they were separated by force. “Mia!”

“Promise me.” She’d said and Lucy wasn’t quite sure what she was promising but it felt important.

“I promise.”

There was cinnamon and then nothing. Brenner loomed when they were alone again.

“We understand each other, don’t we?” He swept to her side. Cupped her jaw. “Don’t fret, you’re going to live a better life. I swear it. Everything carefully in its place.” Still shaken and weepy, she slid her drained eyes to him. “Now smile and say, thank you, Martin.”

Twisted every way, Lucy gulped and managed it.

“Th-Thank you, Martin.”

“There’s my girl. My Zero.” He brought her close to his chest. Let

Lucy cry her little heart out all over his expensive suit. Kept murmuring promises. "I'll take care of everything from here on. You've made my dream a reality. You alone, Lucy. You're safe. It's going to be you and I. Forever and ever."

** ** *

1982

A late night knock at 3:00am. Not much of a welcomed one. Lucy held her silken robe closed and felt around sleepily to answer it. Already knowing who it was. Wind chilled to blow billowy silk open.

"Martin." He looked dapper. Pressed suit and long coat. Stark white hair. Connie and other agents with him. Logan shifted out with a more rumpled appearance and a sigh left her lungs.

"We need a favor. Quickly." Brenner began, rubbing his hands together. "You know how I hate to wake you at all hours of the night. Mess with your routine. We're in a bind, they made a mess and framing it isn't much of an option."

"So, you need a disappearing act." Lucy thought against rolling her eyes.

"I know it's tedious work for you." He sympathized.

"Tedious isn't the word in my brain, Martin." *Heartless* burned her tongue and never left. Martin still heard it and smirked. "Five minutes. I'm not decent."

The door shut on their faces. Lucy splashed her face and pulled on some clothing. Still a dress because she owned no jeans and it was clockwork at this point. Hair shook out after a brush went through it before she was grabbing her purse.

"Anyone riding with me?" She passed the group with more boldness than usual. "Logan?"

"I'll explain." He got into the passenger seat, eyed Brenner on the way.

"Who was it this time?" She started the engine to lead the way. Pulling out onto the street.

"You know we're not allowed to ask that. Rivals, rivals, everywhere and not a speck of forgiveness. We both know how quick the lab likes to shut things down. Lured some poor idiots to my guys and...it got messy. Sawyer needed stitches. They cleaned the mess, but--"

"You can't wipe everything away so they needed me to get rid of them." Lucy set her jaw and stared ahead. "You wash, I dry."

Logan must have been tired because he laughed at that. And she followed.

"Lab likes connections. We both knew this early on." He continued. "You know, your Chief was in my club tonight looking grumpy considering there was a pretty woman shaking her ass on a stage. Boys around him couldn't pay him to smile. You have anything to do with that?"

"Jim does what he wants." Lucy shrugged and took a harder turn.

"Noted." Logan winced. "God, I hate this shithole. Family business is starting to kill me."

"Your illegal dealings benefit the lab, they brought you on hoping you'd run back home. Guess, they did the same thing to me." Lucy parked and got out. Crossed her arms at Brenner and his small party of enforcers. "None of them can touch anything."

"We know the rules, dear. Unlock it. We'll be out before the rooster crows." He followed her up to the funeral parlor. A key clicked. It was wrong to use the kindness of her employers and this place she'd grown to love. But, Hawkins Lab always got what it wanted.

Victims needed to disappear. Cremation. Burial in ready made holes where coffins would go. Creativity was key. Bags were toted in and Lucy stayed at the door with Logan watching outside. Mostly, he stared at the moon and stars.

"It's better, I suppose." Logan didn't turn when she walked up. "Better that he doesn't ask you to take care of them these days. You

just handle clean up.”

“He promised.” She said slower.

“I’m sure he did... They let you talk to Mia?”

Lucy sucked in her cheeks.

“Not for awhile. Security’s been tighter since the accidents.” Lucy neared him while he lit a cigarette.

“I saw her. Only in passing. Looked okay. Intent like wheels were turning.”

“That’s Marti.” Smoke pulled up toward the dark blue of the sky. “She told me there’s others like me awhile back. Years ago. And I always knew there was. But, she talks to them. Cares for them. They feel more real as the days pass, I try not to let her get into detail so she doesn’t. Mia wants to help them. She says they’re mostly disappointing. Except one now... Things are getting worse.”

“We knew it would, Lucy.” Another puff. Something close to acceptance in his expression. Eyes turned to see her there framed in moonlight. “You shouldn’t worry about you. If anyone can make it out of this, it’s going to be the person who survived the start of it.”

“They say all bets are off as we go down the line. Stakes get too high.” She cocked her head. “Nothing lasts forever.”

“No, I feel it. Got a sense for these things.” It was grave. The way he said it. Like he knew his end was nigh. “You smelt hope on me. You still feel that. Amber. Peaches. Old books. Plenty of things last forever.”

“Sometimes cinnamon. Funny thing I can’t place.” She replied with a little distance. Logan smiled at her like he knew. And he did.

“I think that’ll come to you.” Smoke rose behind them. A cigarette snuffed out under his shoe. One hand lifted to tuck hair aside. Almost a farewell for the future.

“Still not worried about you?”

"You never tell yourself you're going to be alright, so I'll say it for you. I don't mind, I always have time to spare for you."

"You're deflecting, Logan." Lucy took his hand and didn't let it go.

"Picked up some new tricks." He drank her in. Sighed back out. "They're running out of batteries. Did you know that? You know that means we have more power, right?"

Lucy opened her mouth to speak, but a voice gripped her.

"Come inside, we're almost done." Brenner stood there. Eyes on both of them. On their hands. Neither stepped from the other.

"Yes." They waited until Martin went back in before Lucy pressed her lips.

"Don't."

"Don't, what?"

"Do something I won't like." Was all she could muster. Logan just smiled.

"I can wait, I guess. Don't protect me. Go find the Police Chief and crawl in next to him and smile because you're going to make it out of this."

"I need you." She peered at the door knowing Brenner would get impatient.

"No, Lucy, you never did. You had all you needed the moment you walked into that lab." He touched her face. "And don't forget that. Promise?"

Not understanding, she still gave him the words softly.

"I promise."

Logan kissed the corner of her mouth. Tilted her chin up when he leaned out to give it a tap. Lucy only breathed and turned to go up the stone steps, fingers slipping away.

“Lucy Garland.” Logan began so she stilled to turn and see him there. Starlight glowing. “Remember this: We’ll always have Hawkins.”

Cinnamon thrilled toward her. A warm perfume like a needed embrace or a silver tear down a cheek. Twinkling stars held the truth back, but they both felt it rise.

Swaying, Lucy beamed at her friend and went up the steps.

** ** *

1965

“We have a couple options as far as color and finish.” Beverly Crawford touched Lucy’s back and led her to a showroom of coffin samples. Felt like she was picking out a dress for a dance.

“Rest assured,” Brenner cut in for the tenth time, “money won’t be an issue. The least I could do is cover the expense for my dear, old friends.”

“Mr. Bateman, was it?”

Brenner bristled like he wanted to correct her. Doctor.

“Yes.” He came to Lucy’s side. Nudged her into him. “You’ll forgive her. She’s not spoken much since...”

“Her parents were so loved.” Beverly insisted, leading Lucy back aside.

“I don’t want this.” She piped quietly, trying to make herself as small as possible. Hands smoothing because they’d dressed her up every day since. Made her go into the burning light so she could bury her parents alone.

Getting back into the world. Spinning stories about a breakdown and her tragic parents who died getting her. Mia running away in response out of some betrayal her little sister brought.

Lucy inherited everything. The house. The car. Whatever money

they had. Brenner ensured it.

“Lucy.” Brenner’s tone made her hands lift to touch a coffin before her.

“How about we go into the next room and speak? I can show you why we do what we do here. I understand how overwhelming this must be for a young woman. Your parents would be so proud, I’m sure.” Beverly whisked her away from Brenner’s eyes. Into the main room where rows of chairs lined. Where two coffins would sit.

“Come sit here with me, Lucy.” Beverly crossed her ankles. Fixed a purple shawl draped around her shoulders. “It felt like you needed a moment to breathe.”

Lucy nodded and inhaled a harder breath. Let it go.

“Sometimes that’s all you can do.” The older woman offered a tissue. Lucy took it after a nod and wiped her eyes. Twisting it. “Funerals are different all over the globe, you know. Sometimes they’re more of a celebration of a person’s life. Because they were loved and they did great things. Sometimes it’s a testament marked by days of silence and weeping to honor a memory of someone you respected. I like to think both are appropriate. We mourn in a way that’s right for us.”

“I don’t...know if I can do an open coffin.”

“That’s always your choice, sweetie.” Beverly sat back. “Really, the open coffin is...your last impression of your loved one. It’s our job to make sure they’re well again. Just how you remember so you can have that memory and know they’re in another place. A good place.”

An image of her parent’s swollen and smashed faces flashed.

“My husband and I love this business, grim as the town makes it. Death is a transition for everyone in its orbit. And we try to make that transition as smooth as possible. Make it a little poetic if we can. In ancient Egypt, they’d scatter valuable possessions around the deceased even. Things to take with them.”

“Didn’t they also pluck the brains out through their noses?” Lucy

lifted her eyes and Beverly's lip quirked.

"Fortunately the embalming process has evolved since those times." She nodded. "Just know this is for your parents and for you and for those who want to gather and remember the imprint Liv and Don are leaving behind. This isn't just a point at which you realize they're gone. They are not gone. And the funeral is going to be how you want it. My husband, Frank, and I are here for you too."

"Thank you." Lucy rubbed her arms, sitting up. "I'm ready to go back out."

"That man, are you related?"

"No," Lucy flicked her eyes aside, "he's just taking care of me. Until I'm back on my feet."

** ** *

They let her stay in that house. A prison now. She slept in Mia's old room. Slept in her parent's bed too. Gathered their clothing as a cocoon. Tried to sleep in, but every morning someone was shaking her awake to face beaming artificial stage lights. Connie. Brenner. Nolan. Usually with some backup to get her up for the day. For her new routine.

Only a few days and she would be back for the funeral. Hawkins left her alone. For the most part. Offers of condolences and casseroles at her doorstep were something. People who could scarcely look her in the eye. Except Benny. He came over with food and held her so tight there on the doorstep. Kissed her head for good measure.

"I'm always going to be here if you need me." He meant that too at the time.

Lucy locked herself inside the house while the rain and wind beat. Felt four walls close in. Dragged up one morning to take her shot. Injected more than she should have and just waited to see what would happen.

Hypoglycemia was a chaotic love and silent too. Washed over you like salty ocean waves. Her scalp grew hot and light. Sweat beaded

under dark hair.

You feel yourself sinking into quick sand. Feel every nerve unfurling. Half expect to melt. The lighter it becomes, the twitches start of an oncoming seizure. It's like getting drunk in ten seconds. Not as fun.

Slurring and slipping along tiles, Lucy pressed her head down to feel the cold swell. Rubbing her face pink.

You feel it happening and it's still a bout of confusion every single time. You know you're in danger and there's this sick inkling of 'let's see what happens.' Still panicky and thumping. Terrifying because your body just stops listening to you.

It's a helpless feeling and it's ugly too.

A reminder that you can't always care for yourself. A mark that your independence is purely coincidental. A red light that tells you you'll rot alive because a chronic illness dictates your life and you might be powerless to stop it. No matter how you eat or exercise or plan or adjust your dose. It's all for nothing and you cannot save yourself. But, without insulin, you still rot all the same. What a punchline.

Ugly. An ugly disease led by an organ that's grown tired and apathetic. So apathetic, it would rather give you the worst death possible and dangle shiny gems of hope about your head. *I'm fine. I have myself together. For now.* Being a diabetic was a huge 'for now.' It was a snap and a fall.

Lucy draped herself across the kitchen floor. Sunk lower. One hand felt out at the sound of footsteps. A genuine gasp rolled off a tongue. Martin.

"Mmmfff..." She tried as he picked her torso up. Cradled her head sweetly. "No."

"You're not going anywhere, dear, drink this." He forced a glass to her lips. She fought him. Swatting and bucking. Convulsed. Choked on it. "Drink. There's my girl." Orange juice burned her throat like

acid.

“Ngh...’et off m-me.” She sputtered and pushed.

“If you don’t start caring for yourself, I’ll put you back under that lab, Lucy. Don’t make me do that, I have such high hopes for you.”

She crumbled and cried there in his lap.

“I can see you need some more work. That’s why we’re here for you today. To complete the transition. Connie.” Brenner dragged Lucy to her feet, let her heave over the sink. “Everything goes.”

“W-Wait.” Lucy stumbled after him. Movers swarmed her home. Started to take furniture and clothing. Everything. Even the hideous curtains she loved. “Stop.”

“Lucy, we’re going to make you and this house brand new. I figured you’d be grateful.” Brenner eased as she grasped his sleeve, blinking some awareness back.

“Not the piano!” Lucy threw herself over it when they dared to get close. “Please...let me keep this. Just this.” Brenner eyed her.

“Very well.” He smiled. “Leave the piano. It’ll suit the room just fine. Come. Connie is taking you out.”

“Make her change,” the agent began with a scowl, “she’s covered in sweat and juice.”

“Lucy, go shower. Quickly. Put on something. Now.” He turned to see her. “Go.”

She watched them unmake her life. Her parent’s dated and loved furniture. The house they decorated together. No more tears crushed her in. Instead, she stiffened to climb the steps. Cleaned herself to appease them. Donned a dress that belonged to her mother. Green with polka-dots. Tied her father’s belt around it. Wore his beaten bomber jacket so she drowned in them.

“Took you long enough,” Connie grasped her wrist, “let’s go. They’ll be here a while.”

“Where are we going?”

“You need to start dressing better. You're a woman now.” *How they like.* “Also, thank god...we're getting you a needed haircut.”

Huh. A girl's day. Strange. Connie drove her an hour away into the city. Picked out clothing. Things she never hoped to wear. Dressed her like all the store mannequins and starlets she watched behind glass. Now she was behind glass looking out at the world.

A fucking wardrobe worth of shit. Dresses. Blouses. Skirts. No jeans. Not even slacks. Underwear with mesh and lace. Bras. Garters for stockings. Something worthy of an actress because that's what she was now. A leading lady. Putting on costumes day in and day out for Hawkins Lab.

Connie did all the picking and talking. Even at the salon where they chopped her long hair up higher than her shoulders. Styled it. She bloomed all pretty and plush, face turning to see the new angles in the mirror. And Lucy didn't recognize herself.

They tossed everything. Even the clothes on her back. Even her damn socks and underwear. Her decorated house was chic now. Pristine and minimalist. A Barbie dream house. Brenner smiled upon seeing her. Touched her face. Lucy was a coveted creature. Body and soul.

“Look at you, beautiful to match what's inside you. *Bravissima.* Quite a transformation.” Brenner showed her around. Let her steer to look over the beloved piano. “I told you they'd leave it.”

She knew what to say.

“Thank you, Martin.”

“You'll find I can be agreeable.” Came the softer reply. They shared the space. Lucy felt him in the air as she faced away, ached knowing his words would be leaving her lips one day.

The house emptied that evening after all the show and tell, leaving them alone. Leaving her under glass and Brenner's sharp eyes.

"It's all new." Lucy didn't want to touch any of it. Felt discomfort as her new undergarments dug to leave red imprints in flesh. She'd get used to this. All of it.

"After the funeral, you'll rejoin society. We're happy to fund some of that. We'll figure a job and when I come to you with tasks, they'll be done. Yes?"

"Yes." She stood in the middle of the room.

"Can you find it within your heart to trust me, Lucy?" So sincere. One hand lifted out toward her.

The scripted answer was flawless.

Lucy slid her palm into his. Curled their fingers. Felt a shadow creep. Wanted to hide within it and never be found.

"You ought to know I do, Martin."

"I'll guide you through life now. Can you trust me to do that?" Brenner crossed closer to her so she moved to evade him, flitting away from his touch. His touch. She sat at the piano, facing away. "I realize it's hard on you. But, you've blossomed into something magnificent. You should be proud of yourself. Likewise, your sister will thrive with us. No more small town hospitals. She'll be respected. You'll grow healthy. You'll want for nothing. You're free." *And you belong to me.*

Was that this feeling? A hard pit where her heart used to be.

"...Thank you, Martin. For everything. I can't repay it." That ached. She couldn't fight him. Couldn't give back this evil he'd put inside her. A poison to be spread out along this world. Everything in her life was written already.

"You will down the line." His eyes burned the back of her skull.

Hands brought the cover up over the keys. Couldn't speak any longer. Didn't want to. So she created music to drown it all out. To drown him out. Show herself that something was still leftover; a thread of her old self.

That girl who climbed trees and played and got dirty. Who ran against leaves in the wind and laughed so hard she snorted. Imperfect and trying for more even if she hid away.

Lucy Garland wasn't bad. Honest. She used to be kind and belonged to herself even with this messy disease. She dreamed harder than anyone in Hawkins once. That tough, little girl was free and alive with a burning fire. It was real once.

It was something she had. *Had*.

Monsters carved a beauty out of a hidden slab of marble. Polished it. Displayed it in plain sight. And she'd have to believe in it harder than all of them.

Martin stood there and listened to her play. A swirling tune with flames and ire. Petals opening and falling all at once. And he did something that made her hate him more if such a thing was possible.

He sat down, pushing into her body. Fingers joined hers along the deeper keys. And he played with her.

Lucy hadn't known he played. Lips clamped because if she inquired, he'd just smile and say that she never asked if he could.

Martin changed the tune to something else. Lucy almost stopped, looked at him there in shock but he ignored her. Just played. So she picked up to follow him. To race back ahead.

Lucy ached to show him with music that she was still free somehow. Still alive. Still beating. That she would be at least down that same line. But, he just kept playing over her. They went back and forth. Hitting the keys with skillful deft fingers until it hurt. She changed the tune and he followed, lips pressing up with amusement. It was a game for him. Her life. He longed to compose it himself.

She kept trying to spirit away from him in this maze but he found her always. Pushed her beyond a stark point with no return. No resisting him. No escape.

Apollo enamored with Daphne. Chasing her through a lush forest until she twisted into a great tree to evade him.

Poseidon attacking Medusa in the sacred temple of Athena. And Medusa was the punished one. Given a power that may have banished and protected her. Lucy wished she could turn the world to stone. Never be looked at again.

She played and tilted her head up, thought of Sextus attacking Lucretia between beatings of hearts and piano keys. Instilling a shame into her that ended her life. Thought of how there was no winning. These women all paid prices and they'd be remembered because men looked at them. Attacked them. Made them something else entirely.

Metamorphosis.

And it was too late. This is who she was now. This beautiful starlet she dreamed of being. Brenner eyed her looking out at the world beyond the glass door. The locked treehouse she wanted to go hid inside. They played on until a peak crept. Martin felt Lucy slipping away so he reeled her in with his scent that trapped.

Hate was an adrenaline infused rush. A fucking thrill. No shame there.

One arm went around her back to the other side of the keys. Continued to play. Lucy gasped to herself. Felt the heat of him holding her as they didn't stop. Played harder and faster. Lips opened with wide, set eyes. A heart thumping against her back. Feeling her respond to him with pride in his ribcage. Bodies swaying together. Brenner's head nudged into the back of her hair. Breath ghosted lighter. He held her and played over her all at once.

Consumed her. And today she let him.

Lucy smelt it finally. Just one shred of burnt sugar. There. Her head tipped back some. Eyes closing when the rest of her was lost at his gleeful beckoning. The song swelled higher to a climax. Slender legs pressed together. Ankles crossing. Goosebumps rose all along scorched flesh.

And she moaned.

Sound cut, fingers drunken and trailing off quieter. Brenner felt her wean and followed. Let her go to sit straighter. His own breath quickened.

Lucy burst with welling eyes. A heave.

“I hate you.” She said. Strong as she could even when the syllables curled back in. “I hate you so much.”

Martin Brenner tucked her hair aside to beam with pride. To observe her expression closer and closer. So close, he could have...

“Not as much as you hate yourself, Lucy.”

A dagger. Martin swept up gracefully, smoothed his hair back to go.

“Take care of yourself, dear, there are consequences if you don’t. We’ll be back tomorrow and the next day. Until the funeral. Until you prove you can function again. You’re going to have to. So much is coming for all of us. I plan to still oversee you personally.”

By the time he opened the door, she’d ripped up. Crossing to close it with one hard push. Brenner looked at her furious eyes, a dawning question in his own. Lucy looked particularly obscene when she was in a red fury with lipstick that matched. The innocence in his surprise grated on her.

And so she threw herself at him. Thought to pound her fists into his chest until it caved in with cracks. Until blood poured out his mouth.

But, Lucy didn’t do that. No. Not at all.

She kissed him instead. Pulled his fancy coat down into her until he was pressed there. Lips near bruising on his. Immediately, Martin was pushing back into Lucy’s mouth. Cupping her head as she moaned and pulled for more of him. Melted into the wall and thought to yank him along in shadows. Martin made a sound against her mouth, let her steal his breath because he owed her that much.

Lucy shattered distantly.

Eyes shot open in realization at what she'd just done. Shoving herself back into the wall until it rattled. They'd removed all the family photos. Left up some tasteful mirrors and décor. Lucy covered her mouth with huge eyes. Head shaking. Brenner puffed and stared down at her. This smirk danced in his expression, but didn't pull. He had her clutched so tight, he might reach into those ribs to hold a beating, neon heart. He might even kiss her there too.

Unable to breathe, she just stared. Eyes red rimmed. No way of processing it. No way to process the heat or throb he'd caused her. The fact that she wasn't anything like she used to be or that the world took more than she gave.

"Get out." She wheezed, one hand lifting to brace for another strike. He didn't try to touch her. A stern reminder that she chose that. She kissed him. All he needed to do was wait.

"I'll be seeing you tomorrow, Lucy." Brenner fixed himself and walked outside, thumbing her red lipstick off his mouth. Forever and ever blared. Left Lucy to slide down the wall. To look around at these four walls and recognize nothing. Her old life. It was gone. Rotten.

There's no right way to mourn that.

** ** *

"Lucy," a voice beckoned, "we're ready for you. Only if you are."

"Yes, Mr. Crawford. Thank you." She'd turned in a tight black dress. It was full out there. The room beyond her. Even on a grey day because her parents were loved.

"Hey, you. Can I walk you in?" Benny offered his arm. Lucy pressed her lips to accept. Two cherry wood coffins. A blown up photo of her parents at their wedding. Smiling bright. Flowers all over. Forget-me-nots and white dahlia's because Olivia loved them.

Heads turned to see Lucy. Music swelled and some of the conversation quieted. Guests went up to offer flowers and look upon the deceased.

"Lucy," Beverly touched her arm as she came upon the open

coffins. Benny held her up because she'd started shaking.

Lucy had expected a mess. Bloody smashed faces all purple and blue. But, they looked like antique porcelain dolls there. Flawless. Fixed. She pulled to go closer herself. No smell.

"You made them perfect again."

"You see, they're alright." Beverly smiled for her. Benny rubbed her back and sniffled himself.

"Hi, Lucy. I brought you this." Karen Wheeler. She was popular in high school. Married an older guy almost right out of it. Just a bit younger than Mia and never cruel to her sister. She put a bouquet of lilies with the rest of the gifts. Hugged her which was strange because she never had before. "Ted and I are here if you need us. Alright?"

"Thank you, Karen." Lucy nodded. Kept her poise as more words and hugs from near strangers followed. She eyed Brenner sitting in the back corner. Watching her. Waiting for something to happen. Was mostly grateful Benny stuck close to her. More parents and kids she knew from high school loomed around, making conversation.

"Lucy?" Someone she didn't expect turned her head.

"Jim?" There he was in a nice suit.

"I hope I'm not too late, I got on a bus. Benny called me." He opened his arms to except her. Sounded like he was shuddering some too. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you for coming." Lucy felt she needed him. Buried her face in his chest. "Sorry." Fingers wiped makeup away so he reached to help with one tender hand.

"No, don't apologize, I'm here for you and...where's Mia?"

"She's...not coming. Left town." The lie was clockwork. "She was too upset with me to come. It's my fault."

"Hey, no, it isn't. That doesn't sound like Mia." He held her waist, felt the pulse speed under two fingers.

“People change, Jim.” Lucy touched his other hand to keep it on her face a beat more then pulled it down. Sniffing harder.

“You look so...different.” Fingers tucked some short black hair aside.

“I am different.” She replied quieter, palms flat on his chest. “How’s the city? New York? The job? Meeting new people?”

“It’s not Hawkins.” Jim paused. “I actually met someone.”

“Oh?” Her smile cracked. “That’s wonderful. We, uh, miss you down here.”

“Yeah, I...I think about you...you guys...a lot.” Jim swallowed, didn’t ask what had happened to the girl in the wind he smiled at. “Don’t worry about me, I’m here for your family. Your parents were good people. The best.”

“They were.” Lucy thumbed her eye again. Looked out at all the people around wandering. “I should...say something.”

“Of course.” Jim let her go to the podium. Chatter quieted as she shifted with nerves.

“Hi... Thank you all for coming. Knowing my parents were loved, it means the world to us. I, uh, didn’t plan to speak. Sorry, I didn’t write anything down. I wish I did...” Lucy hitched to calm down. Felt like the whole town came. Hollands. Byers. Harringtons. Sinclairs. Hendersons.

“...My parents, Olivia and Donald, were soulmates. Having a fairy tale like that, not everyone gets such a great love and they...they had it. My dad used to joke that he’d lasso the moon down for my mother if he could and I believed him. All my life, they made me believe that love was real and everlasting...and it won. I think that touched others too. I think they’d want us to take that away. And my mother would also push us to study more female painters.”

A chuckle went through the audience and Lucy beamed, eyes down.

“I know they’re together and I...I know they wouldn’t regret

anything they've done. They left the world better than they found it. They were great parents and...I can't ask for more. I won't. And I hope...one day down the line, I make them proud."

Brenner watched her stare at him.

"My mom's favorite book was *The Phantom of the Opera*. A running joke on that side of the family because her maiden name matched the heroine. Daaé. She owned English and French editions of the book if you can believe that. There was a line she always liked: *He had a heart that could have held the entire empire of the world; and, in the end, he had to content himself with a cellar.* "

And one day I'll be strong enough to make it out, she thought. One flicker of hope. Maybe that could last her.

"Thank you again for showing up today." Lucy pressed her lips and went to kiss two cold cheeks. *I'm sorry*. Claps sounded when the ceremony picked up so she slipped away unnoticed. Went out back for some fresh air. Let it cool hot tears.

"Hey..." Jim found her. Lucy jumped a little, spinning so fast that her sheer green scarf slipped off. Wind picked it up. She missed trying to stop it before Jim snatched it, approaching with his hands smoothing over chiffon. He settled the fabric back around her neck without words like it was a peace offering. Saved a piece of her from flying away.

"Sorry." She sniffed, eyes averting from his blue ones.

"They were proud of you."

Lucy wanted to break and tell him everything. Scream it until no air was left in this world. Instead, she tucked herself under his arm because he offered her the space. Let him hold her close and kiss her crown. The room in there smelled like blood, it got to her. But, Jim's soul danced with hopeful old books. Budding amber because they were comfortable here alone. Hiding away where no one could find them.

She wanted to ask him to stay. And if Lucy asked him, Jim Hopper

surely would have stayed right here.

But, life drew them separate directions. He had a new job. A new home. A woman who made him smile. He'd be just fine. Hope was wide and vast like the ocean and snatching that from him was something Lucy couldn't do.

"I'm glad you're here now." Was what she offered instead, arms winding around his broad frame.

"I'll only be a phone call away too, you know. And Benny is just down the street. You're gonna be okay, Luce." Jim kissed her hair again and stayed there, arm squeezing her just a little more. Unknowing of what life would throw his way.

Lucy lifted herself to see him. Searched his eyes there while the sun began to set. For a moment all she saw was flashing lights of a carnival in all colors. Bubbling up with laughter and winning jingles.

But, Lucy didn't tell Jim Hopper how badly she wanted him to stay.

And then she remembered all the needles and hands. The burning hands. Glass crunching with metal and screams. All those screams. Human and animal. Her own hands pulling Brenner down to her level for a kiss that tasted metallic. It all rang and whirled until she'd pulled away from Jim looking used and wounded.

"Thank you for coming, Jim."

"Of course, Lucy. It's going to be alright, you know? I promise."

It felt he saw the old Lucy in there. Somewhere. And he only wanted kindness for her. Red lips lifted with a nod.

"I believe you."

Jim watched her go back inside before lighting up a cigarette.

Notes for the Chapter:

Yeap...that happened. Thank you all so much, those following the story. I really will always appreciate it,

feel free to chat with me below or yell. ^_^

8. Pink Strawberry Cake

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello all! Lucy makes a few decisions about the future. Sexual references, emotional abuse, light mention of past suicide/torture, and forced surgery. More Jim in the next one, this is Lucy-centric. Time is starting to speed up.

Winter 1965

“I know what I want to do.” Lucy dunked a tea bag in and out of hot water. Seemed to be dreaming. Recalled the dirt sprinkling between her fingers and into two open graves. One last goodbye.

“Do you?” Logan stood in the doorway with his hands in his pockets. Something off about his scent today.

“All well and good, I’m sure you’ll excel at anything you do.” Connie huffed, stepping forward. “Did you tell her your news, Dr. Myers?”

“News?” Lucy looked between him and Brenner.

“I’m switching specialties.” Logan’s words pulled amusement from the others in the room. “I’m quitting. We won’t be having sessions any longer.”

“You’re-...Why do you smell like that?” Lucy stood up, coming around the table. He wouldn’t look at her. She turned to Brenner. “What’d...” It dawned with everlasting rust. “Him, too?”

“What’s that mean, Lucy?” Brenner touched the island counter and crossed.

“I wondered why you pulled an outsider for the experiment. I thought long and hard and...it was his family's dealings. Underground illegal activity. Enforcers. Muscle. More pushers. That’s what you needed. You never needed a nice report written, you’ve already paid for those. You needed someone to control who controlled those

businesses without getting your hands dirty. You needed him to go back so getting rid of his family is how you did that.”

“Your girl is smarter by the hour, Brenner.” Connie actually smiled. Brenner cocked his head so Lucy dropped her arms.

“I’m the last one. Last member of my family. Now.” Logan sucked in his cheeks. Wouldn’t rage or scream or cry, but Lucy smelled it. “So, I’m not practicing any longer. I’m going to take over my uncle’s club. Operate for the lab when needed from there. Keep the businesses alive and money flowing for our friends. Dr. Brenner always gets what he wants, huh.”

“Hardly. I serve the greater good, Dr. Myers. We all do and now, so do you.”

“You gonna bug her house too, Doctor?”

“Actually, no. We removed those two weeks ago. I trust Lucy won’t create problems. Now. She’s her own woman.” Brenner touched her shoulder. Passed to see Logan. “And I expect the same from you. You’re one of us. Revel in that. We protect our own. You should be happy, you and Lucy will be working closer than ever before when jobs run your way. Clean up. Information pulling. You get the idea.”

“Murder and torment. We understand.” Logan grew sarcastic. It was a different face he had on today.

“Don’t make a mess.” Brenner turned his head. “Lucy, you have an appointment with a new doctor tomorrow morning. No need to thank me.”

She still did.

“Thank you, Martin.”

“Connie and I will see ourselves out. My men will meet with yours tonight, new leaves to be turned over. Yes?” Brenner stared until Logan nodded. Favors and lose ends to be tied. Years worth. “Farewell for now.”

A hand skimmed Lucy's back.

Martin never brought up the kiss. He never needed to.

There was a beat while Lucy stood across from her friend.

“Did they suffer?”

“Yes.”

“Was it because we talked out of turn? The note passing.”

“No, Lucy, it was always going to happen. I slept soundly and woke to the news of...” He rubbed his eyes. Tossed his glasses onto the table. “It was written the day I walked into that place. They got two sole survivors to bend.”

“I’m sorry, even still.” She watched him sit at the table and pulled a chair closer.

“You asked about the pills. Anxiety and depression. High highs and low lows. Ever since I was a kid.” He began. “My sister had it too. She didn’t make it out. I found her when I was twelve. Hanging from her bedroom window. Didn’t even leave a note. Every single day, I wonder if she saw something similar to me. The family’s true face. I wonder if that killed her. And I hated them for it every day after I saw...”

Lucy pulled his hand over to hold it in both of her own.

“When I was thirteen, I walked in on my dad and uncle beating this guy up. Torturing him. One of his fucking eyeballs was dangling out his skull. Some rival of their dealings, I don’t know. I’ve never seen them...like that. My mom and everyone was in on this underground life. My family. They’re well off. Respected. Fucking organized crime. So, I went to school to get away and still ended up back here.”

“You helped me.”

“No, I stood there and listened.” Logan scoffed. “I saw others. Drooling in their own piss and vomit. They groomed some of those more powerful to be like you and so far the rest have disappointed. But, I know that another will come along who doesn’t.”

“Mia’s in there.”

“They won’t hurt her unless one of you...pulls.”

“They’ll find a reason to hurt us. This, I know for sure.” Lucy put her hands into her lap. “You’re not like Brenner or Barker or Nolan.”

“Nolan?”

"It's nothing, I'm upset. I shouldn't have said that."

"Lucy."

“He...He touches me.” Lucy closed her eyes when she said it. “Brenner doesn’t know. He wants to keep being my handler and keeper. Fucking marry me and they might let him if I was able to have a powerful child for them. Diabetics aren’t able to really, did you know that?”

“Yeah.” Logan leaned to watch her face.

“All my life, I wanted what my mom and dad had. A family. A cute little baby. Mia didn’t care for it, her career was everything. She was going to be an amazing surgeon. And that’s fine too. I know now that if I’m a mother, it’ll never be on my own terms. I can’t have that.” Lucy sighed. “I called the Crawfords. Asked them how I can do what they do. Make people perfect again. People who will rot. I...didn’t word it like that. They’re going to help me, Brenner should have no qualms. I won’t make noise doing such a job. He’s going to pay for my bills and schooling. He promised me.”

Lucy paused to see him.

“You helped me and I can help you.”

“Hope looks good on you, did you know that?” Logan softened, standing up. “My family lives two towns over. Fire didn’t leave much. Only me.” He pulled a card from his wallet. “My club. *Blue Velvet*.”

“Like the name.”

“Yeah,” Logan scratched his neck, “I’ll keep it. Seedy place, but you

need anything. Come in. Free drinks. Guy at the door, he's been with my family for years. Sawyer. He knows to look out for you. Don't let his size scare you."

He stopped to see her there.

"I'll see you around, Lucy."

"Logan, if you..." Lucy stood to follow him to the door, trailing off. "Just, ah, I'm here too."

Lips pressed before he left her alone.

** ** *

A ding.

"Doctor give you good news?" Nolan met Lucy just outside the elevator doors. Her shoulders fell.

"Not sure we should be seen together. People will think we're in love." She passed him clutching her purse. "Where's my car?"

"A pickup is no car for a lady."

Lucy swallowed her grief that time. Her father's rusted old car. The one he loved.

"I'm driving you around until the new one comes in tomorrow."

It was odd to see Nolan out of his uniform. No lab coat. No rubber gloves to be snapped off.

She was supposed to go shopping.

"Home, in that case." Lucy lingered behind him to a silver car. Thought about running.

"What did your doctor say, Lucy? You seem upset." He paused. "Buckle up."

"My dose is unchanged. Keep up the routine."

“And?”

“And I can’t have children.” She hated admitting it to him. Of all people. “I always knew, but-”

“Confirmation. That’s not easy.” His hand was on her knee, smoothing fabric up while she clenched there. Shut her legs tight. Nolan puffed and started the car. “I’m sorry. I’m sure you think it dampens your worth.”

"I don't. My uterus isn't my only part. Fortunately."

"I just meant, it's what every woman wants." He scoffed. *It really wasn't.*

Something horrible sparked behind her eyes. It clawed too up the back of her throat.

“I can have a child. I just...shouldn’t. But, hey, anything can happen. People overstep. They have accidents. Right?”

“You’ll die.”

“Everyone dies, Nolan.” Lucy looked outside and felt his gaze. Bitterness curled.

“That feels like a threat, dear, don’t go waving your woman parts around like a loaded gun.”

She hated him.

Lucy would drink bleach just to spit it between his lips.

Her jaw snapped shut with a quiver. Furious that she had to breathe in the same space as him.

The glimmer behind her eyes became a raging storm. This was stupid and it was the only way out.

“Maybe I’ll have a baby and send her far from here. Get a few years with her and make sure the lab can’t touch her. They lose me too. Huh. My kidneys will go. Be quite the fuck you. Especially if she

doesn't inherit what they want. Mia didn't. It's a gamble."

"You're being irrational."

Lucy snapped.

"And you're still unable to impress Brenner."

The brakes slammed. Lucy smacked forward with a grunt.

"You're acting like a fucking bitch and it's going to stop. Right now." His finger rose, eyes flicking. She felt for the handle to get out and was grabbed by the hair. "You try to fight, your sister pays. So, sit quietly right now. Hear me?"

"Yes." She cracked, hands up to rub her pained scalp. Nolan hit the gas to go.

Lucy paid for this later. Just as she knew she would. Martin was becoming predictable.

That night Brenner's men trudged into her home. Spirited Lucy out in her nightgown and robe. Into a car and away to Hawkins Lab.

"I never wanted to say anything, sir. She forced my hand." Nolan was speaking when a bag was pulled up over her head. Interrogation room. Full of suits. A thrill sparked.

"Someone's been speaking out of turn." Brenner knelt before her. Lucy squirmed with bound hands, looked around. "Nolan tells you you've been forward with him. Tossing yourself on him and begging for a baby. Trying to seduce him. After what the doctor told you."

"I..." Lucy felt a chill when he looked at her eyes. "No, I..."

"I want to believe you. I do in fact, I think Nolan's gotten jealous. Possessive. That's quite inappropriate."

"Sir, I..."

"You can go, Mr. Creed. We'll talk about your future here after this is dealt with."

Nolan turned red. Like an old tomato. Marched out because he was fucked.

"That said," Martin turned back to Lucy, "he brought up a risk we can't have."

"Had I wanted to seduce him, I would have pumped him full of sweet burnt sugar." She leaned forward and Brenner ignored her.

"Were you a healthy girl, we'd be happy to supply that kind of future. And any child you have would be taken care of."

And that was Lucy's biggest fear.

"But, you're too important. Too strong to lose. Risk outweighs reward. You're young and we expect you to be around for a long time, Lucy."

"Martin."

"*Don't.*" There was this inkling of betrayal wafting off him. Many scents made up such a feeling. Metal. Bleach. Burning fire. Sewage. Brenner cupped her face to kiss her head. "It may seem like a waste. But, know we're going to do this for you. For your own good."

"Men always say that before they hurt you." She watched him still. Sniffled to see his eyes. "Is this what you want for me forever? Me silenced and worked like a puppet. Unable to love you back for real. Unable to make my music. Was this what Amanda taught you?"

His eyes glimmered. A gentle hand cradled her face. One she pressed into.

"She taught me the only fair world is the one I force."

Lucy was pulled up by two vice grips. Brenner loaded a needle.

"You're going to wake up in bed. Safe and sound. There's my girl." He turned to come toward her. Liquid beading from the silver tip.

She didn't fight it any longer. Looked at his eyes with this longing like she wanted him to do it. Brenner seemed to notice too and still

pricked her. Pain erupted up her neck.

And then nothing.

** ** *

March 1966

“It’s a birthday, Lucy, you should celebrate it.”

“They let Mia and I have a phone call.” Lucy Garland peaked through a sliver of open curtain. Snow fell. Too peaceful for the storm inside her. “I have work. I have my studies.”

“Throwing yourself into it still.” Logan was seated on the arm of her sofa, head cocked. She turned with a hard expression.

“Until I’m perfect at it.”

His eyes fell to her wrist.

“Is that a new watch?”

“From Brenner.” She flashed the gold band. “I saw Nolan today. Blue shiner around his eye that he insisted he got slipping in the snow.”

“Oh?”

“And you know nothing about that, Logan?” Lucy’s monotone didn’t shake him. “Last week, I told you he made an advance. Whenever he does, he has accidents.”

“I wouldn’t know anything and neither would the bruise on Sawyer’s knuckles.”

“You shouldn’t do things like that.” She pressed her lips at him.

“It’s what my guys do, Lucy. We shake people now. He’s not your handler. I thought Brenner was monitoring you...closer.”

“He’ll drop in per their word if everyone is tied up. I feel they’re tests for him led by Brenner and he’s failing.” Lucy passed in front of

the mirror. Stopped to see herself there. Blinked at the enchanting girl. Eighteen. "He's been looking forward to my birthday, keeps pressing the marriage bug to get back at me. Jaded they took him off it after I got out and he...told that lie."

"And we're not letting that happen."

"We?" She thumbed some lipstick into place around the corner of her mouth.

"Barker's replacement any better?"

"Dr. Elizabeth Simms. Bit of a bat. Thirties. Doesn't hit as hard when I'm being willful."

"You can't control your irritability during hypoglycemia."

"The lab is jumpy when I act out." Lucy turned, hands clasped together. Poised. "Brenner thought for two seconds that I might commit suicide via birth then kidney failure and had my uterus sliced up. And they say women overact. What a joke."

Logan's lip twitched at her before he stood up.

"You don't seem sad about it. You never talk about it."

"You're not my shrink any longer."

"But, I am your friend." He eased. Gentle as he could. Her eyes swept him before she stepped closer.

"Worst part is the scar."

"You prodded Nolan on purpose didn't you? You knew he'd tattle."

"He's a child. That's what children do. They tattle. I told you, they'd never let me be a mother on my own terms. Anything that comes out of my body belongs to Hawkins Labs. I won't bear them a legacy." Lucy stood straighter with her head tilted down, eyes lifting. This hint of menace in her expression. "No doctor would cut me."

"So you manipulated the lab to do it."

“Manipulated is a strong word, Logan.” She lifted a sharp letter opener, pointed it at his chest. “They can have my body. Nothing else. I *reject* motherhood. I reject it. Not ever. Not for them. So, I made it permanently impossible. Hear me? If I am ever a mother, it’s my terms. Mine. I won’t bear a monster for them and if they try to put one inside me, I’d sooner see it flushed. It’d be a beast.”

“Few would judge you for that.”

“Plenty would.” She set the blade aside. Turned to finish getting ready, pushing earrings into lobes so Logan veered the subject.

“You tell Brenner about Nolan, he’ll believe you. The guy let you off Barker.”

Lucy stared. One beat.

“Thank you for visiting me, Logan, but I need to get to work soon.”

“You’re saving something for him, aren’t you?” He came to her. Sighed and watched the snow tumble outside. “What are you waiting for, Lucy?”

This cool acceptance fluttered her expression.

“Until it’s perfect.”

** ** *

“I can’t...I can’t do this.” Lucy’s shaking hands fell away. Poised over a still, grey body they’d pumped with fluids and cleaned. Stitched a calm expression in place. All that was left was the paint. Beverly remained patient with her.

“You’re second guessing yourself.”

“I have to make them perfect. I have to. This family needs to see their loved one perfect one last time.” Lucy pressed her gloved hands on a table, head shaking. The chill in the air nipped her skin. Frankly, she preferred the cold.

“It’s not about perfection. They want to see their loved one at

peace. Just as they remember them. One last time.” Beverly came to her. Removed her own rubber glove. The sound of the snap made Lucy flinch. A fire sparked her belly. “You’ve worked day and night. Don’t empty yourself out. Grief does that, it drains and burns us all at once. We start to spend parts of ourselves that should never have been given away. Things we might not get back.”

“Innocence?”

“No, things like love. Things like hope. Compassion.” She replied, rubbing Lucy’s back after a moment of thought. “You’re passionate about this. That’s good, these people need to feel that. They need to feel hope too. Perfection is so far away. Perfection comes when you feel right inside. It’s all about perception. If it feels right inside here.” A finger tapped her chest. “Then it’s perfect all the same. Have some confidence in you. We just bottle that sensation and let these families wear it for one last night. This is their goodbye. Our job is to make it meaningful.”

“Bottle it.” Lucy lifted her head. Shoulders squaring. A brush still clutched in her hand.

“We’re not dressing up death to make it pretty so they forget.” Beverly guided her back to the head of the table. “Such a thing isn’t possible. We help them face it and process in a way that’s appropriate for them. It’s an art. You have years of study ahead of you. You’ll have access to this place and to the coroners. We work together almost, Gary and us. Start and finish of death. It’s important to understand the full process the moment the heart stops beating.”

“Routine. That much I can follow.” Lucy’s eyes flicked, a gentler sigh came forth. “Can I...keep applying?”

“Yes, or course.” Beverly pulled on a fresh pair of gloves. “Not too much shadow here. Just like the photograph.”

Lucy pretended each body was a composition of music notes. And she played each process in the correct order until the end. Silent applause.

Funerals were overwhelming initially. The stink of metallic blood

flooded out the walls. Sometimes a twang of old books would follow it. Something good there. She watched Frank and Beverly work and organize the room. Each event was a new museum exhibit. Quiet bodies moving around each other. Moving around an undisturbed open or closed coffin. Art and death became part of Lucy's composition. Part of her budding routine.

Morning shot. Work. Study. Work. Home. Nightly shot. Sometimes a visit from the lab. Sometimes another loose end. Lucy felt she was tugging frays in a tightly woven sheet. Waiting until the threads couldn't take anymore. Until they unraveled.

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Summer 1966

"Thank you," Lucy had turned at a doorway, for having me for dinner. It was delicious."

"Of course. Enjoy the day off tomorrow." Frank walked her to her car as he always did. "Drive safe, will you?"

"I will." Lucy smiled. Saw Beverly waving in the window. Imagined her parents together, watching her go. "Goodnight." She got in to pull down the dark street. Played with the radio and decided to drive home in total silence.

Dreamed that maybe she should just keep driving.

A black car sat in her driveway. Brenner. Her own heart picked up. Another task for her to do.

He didn't like to be kept waiting long so Lucy hurried up and opened her door. Already unlocked because he had a key.

"Lucy." Brenner sat back at her kitchen table. Smoothed the lace runner that ran down it. "You'll forgive me, I helped myself to the brandy." Ice clinked around in a short glass.

"Have you been here long?" She locked the door and set her purse on the island. Put a little lunchbox in the fridge to prepare her insulin for tomorrow.

“No.” He uncrossed his legs and looked at her face. Neutral expression. A twang of rust betrayed him. “They say it’s bad to drink alone.”

“They do say that.” Lucy agreed without moving until he pushed the seat out next to him with one foot. Fancy Italian shoes caught the light. He’d loosened his tie and draped his overcoat at the table edge. She fetched another glass with ice and came to sit. Allowed him to pour.

“Something for me tonight?”

“I wouldn’t advise drinking before you use.” Brenner smiled like it might have been a joke. She picked the glass up to hold it. “Did you eat your fill? Take your shot?”

“Yes.” Lucy sipped for good measure.

“You’ve been out about a year, you know? Rejoined the world. Done so well. I only wanted you to know that. See how far you’ve come. The fact that we don’t have to...pay you visits and send handlers out. It’s good. Your handlers have been retired for new tasks up in our lab. Dr. Creed took it hard. Argued he’d been with you too long and that his hard work was wasted.”

“And what did you say?” Lucy asked that because it genuinely interested her. Brenner drank and poured another glass.

“I told him it was insulting. You put the work in. He’s behind that line and that’s where he’s going to stay. Never liked that one. Too big for his britches, you could say.”

“I found him very small.” Lucy’s remark brought his gaze back. Seemed to be in a good mood. “Martin, I wondered-”

“Your sister has adapted well to the work too. She’s incredibly clever. Blunt. Protected. Not eating her fill.” He spoke over her, studying his drink like he might have seen the future within its depths.

“She likes neapolitan ice cream.” It was a slow offer and Brenner eyed her, lip twitching.

"I'll let them know."

A beat. Lucy drank some to clear her nerves. Bundling low in her stomach. Wisps that seemed to continuously curl into each other.

"Thank you, Martin."

"You're very welcome, Lucy." Brenner spotted her glass empty. Filled it. "Last one for you." He pushed the brandy aside after.

"You're not here with a job for me."

"No." He shook his head. Neither drank. Just held the glasses carefully. Swished liquid around. "Truthfully, your company is the only one I care for at the time being. Does that depress you?"

"Frankly, it should depress you more, Martin." Lucy felt laughter bubble. He gave a breathless chuckle. Didn't even blink.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. And yet, it doesn't, it just feels right."

"Why's that?"

"You're a good actress, Lucy, but you never kiss up. You never try to impress me. Likely because you know you don't have to try." Brenner didn't look at her as he said this. Only admired the curtains in her window. "You just do as you are. I hate when these people try to get ahead in such away. I find it insulting."

"Because they think you can't see it? Like you're blind."

"Precisely." He clicked his glass into hers and drank. "I let you lie all you please because you do it so respectfully." His tone evened out into something less crisp. "It's my mother's birthday today. Well, it would be."

"Oh." Lucy wasn't sure how to take that.

"I was her only child." Brenner continued. Painfully sober. So, Lucy gulped. "We were very poor when I was a boy. I scraped together every penny I could to buy her a cinnamon treat from the bakery. Just to see her smile. Sold newspapers from the age of eight for

coins.”

It was a hard thing for Lucy to picture. A scrappy boy running along city streets with dirt on his cheek. Brenner seemed to want to share these parts of himself with her. Because she was special to him. Lucy was aware he'd never shared such things with others.

For a moment, she wondered if him sharing such intimate details with another would bother her.

That thought was stark. Sharp like the edge of a knife across her belly.

“My mother had many jobs. Always dressed up and went out. Came back with cash spilling from her little purse. She sold herself too. Never brought the men into our home or talked about it. But, I knew. Many in our neighborhood did. I once stabbed a boy with a sharp pencil for even bringing it up. I loved her and I was her whole world.”

This time, Lucy drank so she didn't have to respond.

“And the stories she would tell...unlike anything I could have read. Full of magic and whimsy.” Brenner smiled to himself as he recalled them. Lucy thought she saw sugar plums dancing behind his eyes. “She didn't die violently. Illness took her safe in her bed. I was fourteen, almost fifteen. I prayed to stop it and the world never replied. So, I decided I'd be the one in control. Force the world to make sense because it refused to listen to reason.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Lucy felt a tear run down her cheek so he caught it on his thumb. “Manipulate a friendship where I feel safe. To make me feel special? Make me feel sorry for you?”

“No, Lucy, I'm aware you never could. That's fine.” Brenner faced her in his chair. She ruefully wiped her second tear aside, sniffing.

“I don't. I might pity the boy who stopped letting people into his heart at fourteen. The messy boy who played and bought his mother her favorite cakes. But, I don't pity this...void before me.” She hissed and reeled back.

“Speak your mind, please.”

“Why?”

“Because I asked you to.” He recalibrated. “Because I want you to.”

Lucy sprang up and tossed her glass into the floor. Shattering it. Brandy splattered out around ice cubes.

“You know, I wished for a moment that those pieces might pick themselves back up. As if that’ll make me feel real again.”

Blue eyes lifted to admire her there.

“I did as well, Lucy. Can you trust that much?”

“You don’t get to do that.” Lucy cried. Unable to harness the rage and pain she felt. It splashed along the floor. Didn’t pull her back together. “You destroyed me and others! That’s what I think! Your world is ugly.”

Brenner just stared up at her. Collected.

“Let it out, it’s clear you need it.” He advised in his clinical way.

“You twisted me. You used me and I...and I...” Lucy’s shaking fists tried to grasp for more and more, but it was slipping down through her fingers. Martin was all encouragement.

“Do you dream, Lucy, of striking me down? Filling me with poison.” He leaned forward. “My death.”

“You ought to know I do! I want to hit you. I want to see you shatter like glass and I want to fill you with...with...I don’t know, anything. But, I can’t and it’s not just because you have my sister in your prison!”

"I know that."

"I dream of you on the slab, still and at my mercy! I'd stitch and paint you however I desire. Make the world's last memories of you my design! Mine! I'd sit on your grave too and eat an appropriately

sized piece of pink strawberry cake!”

And he laughed at that with a certain kind of fondness. Standing to loom.

“You ache so bad, then do it.”

“What?” Lucy was tumbling to pieces. Vibrating so hard.

“Strike me at the least. I see it in your eyes. Do it.” That challenge was met with her open palm lifting. Bodies so close, all she needed was one hard swing. She could probably knock him off his feet. Send him into the table and shatter the rest of the brandy. Brenner’s eyes flickered in wait. “Hit me, dear. You’ll feel so much better, won’t you?”

“I will.” Lucy stood frozen. Face scrunched with the twisted weight of agony. Miles and miles of it. “I hate you so much, I’d set this house on fire with both of us in it.”

“That certainly cuts into your planned fantasies.” Martin’s head cocked. Fascinated. Enchanted.

“Stop telling me how to daydream about your death!” Lucy’s hand swung back, readied to blow before fingers snatched at his collar. Brenner didn’t even wince. One tug and their lips collided. She whimpered against him. Came out with dawning horror. One sentiment came. “You hurt me.”

“Yes.”

“We’re both evil.”

“Yes.”

“You took everything from me.”

“Not everything.” Martin uttered softer. “Not yet.”

He kissed her this time. Cradled her face as he did like she meant something to him. Her Angel of Music. Lucy wept against him. Quivering lips came out to squeak. Inches away. Burning.

“You made me ugly.”

“No, Lucy, you’re more beautiful now than you ever have been.” He shook his head as if it were a stupid thing to say. Held her jaw up with force.

“I used to belong to myself. I still had me. I’m not me anymore.”

“You’re better, you’ll get used to it.” His gripped for thin wrists and kept her upright. Shaken knees chattered. About to buckle.

“The lab dressed me up. This is a matter of circumstance. Good looks are a perfect accident.” Her arms pressed into his chest, bodies swaying together. Another firm kiss. A moan.

“And if comeliness were earned, you’d still be incredible. You opened a world, Lucy, you spun air into gold. Do you not realize that?”

Lucy slapped him that time. Weakly, but it still made a harsh sound. She shoved off him and slipped back into the counter. Head shaking. Hair fell into her face, bowing to await punishment again that didn’t come. Martin only swept his hair back.

“Do you feel better now?” He asked sweeter.

“No.” Lucy pulled her blouse from her skirt. Lowered fabric to show him the scar. Raised and puckered. Straight edge. Across the lower part of her belly. “Look at it. You did this. The fading ones on my back and ass and thighs. Those all came from you even if you never lifted a finger. Is this the enchanting world your mother told you stories about? Huh? You asked me to leave the world uglier than I left it...you’re a monster. Why....Why!”

“Why, what?” He whispered.

“Why are you so,” rough tone hitched to hit the word, “*evil?*”

Martin only eyed the angry flesh with no answer. She realized that maybe there was a point to which the explanation wasn’t important anymore. This is who he decided to be. This is how he decided to design the world around him. Sob stories count for shit if you do

nothing but instill them in others.

“I saved you from yourself.” He scoffed. “What permitted you to say all of this, hm? Who filled you with boldness to speak your mind? Would you have spoke up like this before you met me? That shy girl who walked into my office. She died for a great cause. Did she not?”

And that fired an arrow straight into her heart.

“Lost your voice, dear.” Martin came back into her space. “Lucy.”

She smelled his aftershave. Clean and pristine. Smelled the brandy on the tiles that she hadn’t moved to mop up. Smelled burnt sugar and *Colonia*. Her name came out even softer. A beckoning call.

“Lucy...”

She tore the arrow from her heart and threw her arms around his neck. Kissed him because she didn’t know what else to do. Utterly unmade.

Martin’s arms were around her waist. Kissing back. Enthralled now. A waiting bear trap snapped shut somewhere. He pressed her into walls and doorways. They dragged each other up stairs.

Hands felt around in the stumbling. Lucy grew dizzy from the kissing and spinning so she pulled out to breathe. Sunk her palms under his coat as a signal.

“Do you want this?” Martin Brenner asked that in a genuine sort of fashion as if she had a choice.

Lucy realized what she wanted was miles away out of her reach. So she grasped for him because he was here. Because she had nothing else. Because he knew her and held her tight.

Because he unmade her. Because she hated herself. Because she fucking wanted it.

Every single reason was another red brush stroke upon skin. Another hard note in this hellish composition that was her life.

“Ah.” He kept her from loosening his tie. “Ask.”

“Yes.” Lucy cracked. “Please, Martin.”

It became a prayer.

Yes. Please. Martin.

“Fold them aside neatly.” Came the instruction when clothing was discarded. Mechanical, Lucy folded fabric on her dresser in two nice piles. A streetlight from outside filtered in around the curtains. Made the shame of this less stark in dim light. They really looked at each other. Pull. Push.

Lucy set fire to the room. Didn't cover her nudity. Let him look at her.

Yes. Please. Martin.

On her back. On the bed. Brenner hovering. Kissing her.

“Hands.”

Martin had rules. Clothing neat. Hands stay down. He would always be on top. Condoms. Lights low. Clockwork.

Lucy saw the glint of a foil packet and realized he knew what would happen between them. The sterilized rubber reminded her this exchange was carefully paced and analytic. She dug her fingers into the pillowcase. Wondered when he'd started to buy them for her.

Felt the heat of his lean, immaculate frame. The weight bearing down until a gasp hitched up her throat. He breathed heavier. Filled her. Fell forward to hold the duvet between spidery hands.

Yes. Please. Martin.

He didn't strike her or talk dirty. Never talked about how wet and pretty she was. Never sunk teeth into flesh.

Never groaned to tell Lucy that she was a wanting little slut. A whore. A murderess.

Barely left marks aside from fingers digging into her sides and hips. Wasn't interested in choking or forcing her to her knees.

Solidified that she was lost and a monster while she let the man who ruined her life and killed her parents screw her. In their old bedroom, no doubt. Luckily the furniture was changed.

Pleasure was inevitable despite Martin's impersonal way. She closed her eyes. Sighed. Twisted. Bucked to meet him. Worked to the tip top of a peak. Forgot herself. Screams within her lungs never reached the surface. Lucy just rocked there, head tilted back. It became too much and he waited for that exact moment to crawl. Thumb smearing lipstick across her mouth before a kiss. Down her neck. Along one breast.

"Yes. Please. Martin." She shuddered and licked her lips. Overcome. Dripping. "*Please.*"

A hand moved down to ease her because she was just too good. Lips met again. Opened. His nose ran the line of her jaw down her throat. Inhaled every bit of her he could into him. *Magnificent*. Until they quaked. Gasping and huffing to recall the exact sensations they succumbed to.

Another rule. He never stayed. Never pulled her close to hold her after and murmur saccharine things. Lucy stretched out on the bed. Spread open. He was impersonal, yes, but fucked her well enough. Enough to get the point across. Enough to make her sore for the next day's activities.

Brenner got up and dressed himself again. Smoothed his brown hair back into place. Noticed a sprinkle of white.

It would happen again. And again. His clothing on her dresser. Her hands down on the bed.

"Goodnight, Lucy. Sleep well." He always said after as he fixed his tie and cufflinks. The reply was the same too.

"Thank you, Martin. You too."

They never planned to meet. Never had a torrid love affair through

the years. Never felt the spark. She always was allowed to say no. Sometimes she did and they stopped. It just happened from time to time when the air filled with water. When she crawled to him, when he waited for her to tug at his tie. An unspoken thing that he let her engage.

A red thread Brenner wrapped around Lucy's pretty throat and pulled taut.

And when she came to kiss him, he always tasted sugar plums.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you guys for reading, stay and chat if you have the time. ^^

9. A Very, Very, Very Fine House

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello all! Thanks for being fantastic!

I'll just jump right in. Time begins to speed and Lucy goes through some bigger changes. TW: Brenner, sexual references, heavy drinking, past assault mention, explicit murder and torture-Not Lucy:)

Spring 1967

Lucy got the inkling Connie knew. About the sex. Her damn pursed lips wrinkling, she thought the women's face would crack. Eyes always noticing bits of new jewelry on Lucy's body when she came in for "work."

Brenner liked it when Lucy stood to his right these days. Walks around Hawkins Lab where he briefed her on news.

Need to know stuff. She didn't often ask for more. Only her sister.

Not the people who came after her.

"Come inside, it's starting to rain."

"I like the rain." Lucy still followed him. A little pep in her step today. A visit with Mia. She felt powerful next to him. Heels clicking. So many eyes along the slopes of her frame.

Their steps in perfect tune as if choreographed. Weaving through crowds of scientists and suits. All so official. And did they all watch her closely.

Lust. Intrigue. Fear. Envy. Lucy grew enamored with it all.

She was Dr. Brenner's Subject Zero. His greatest shiny achievement. He'd told her that a couple times and would again.

His little confidante.

They walked through bustling rooms. Passing rows of desks covered in files and machinery. A stack of papers slipped over in front of them and hands sprang down to grab at the mess.

“Watch yourself.” Brenner sighed, clearly irritated. Nolan lifted his eyes and caught Lucy there. Not moving to help him.

“Apologies. We’re swamped, doctor.”

“Try keeping your station clean.” Brenner moved around him. Lucy smelled the shame and relished it. Considered pressing her heel into Nolan's skull.

“So, this is where you’ve been. At a desk. I haven’t seen you on the field in months, Nolan.”

He blazed silently.

“Lucy.” Brenner pointed to the floor next to him. A snap command.

“I’ll be seeing you.” Lucy stepped over the mess and came to Brenner’s right side to go. Nolan watched, heat and squealing rubber in the air.

“You seemed to enjoy that.” Brenner had mused, adjusting a cufflink.

“Never liked that one.” She shrugged in the hallway.

“I instructed him to be kind and giving toward you. Opposite of Barker. You seem to loathe him just as much. If not, more.”

“As you said, he sucks up. Maybe we have some things in common.” Lucy peered away. “He was certainly giving.”

“This way.” Brenner gestured with one hand to the garden at the heart of the building. “You know the drill, Lucy. Behave. Thirty minutes. Perhaps, I’ll tell the agents to be late.” He tipped her chin. “Just for you.”

“Thank you, Martin.” Lucy passed him to go out into the sprinkling of rain. Mia stood at the center in uniform, head cocked up toward

the sky. "Mia."

She turned, opened her arms so they both rushed. Every time, they tried to avoid the emotions of it. Suppose these things were inevitable. Mia wiped Lucy's tears away as she always did. Paler. Little thinner. But, still charging forth. It was months between meetings.

"They whisper about you here." Mia began, taking Lucy's hands. Kristen's ring sat safely in a jewelry box at home. "The things he makes you do."

"We don't have to talk about that." Lucy's eyes turned aside. "I'm protecting us. I have to."

"There are others. Just like you. Even younger. I talk to them." Mia came closer to drop her voice low.

"We can't," Lucy pulled from her sister. "Just do as Martin says. We'll get you out of here."

Mia smiled at her with watery eyes.

"Not while you're alive, Lucy, don't you see that?"

"Don't say things like that. They're trusting me. I listen. I do everything they say and I get things back. I'll get you back." Lucy cupped her face. Allowed Mia to hold her wrists tight.

"I'm going to help them. Even if it's just one. I promise. If I'm inside this place, I know what I have to do."

"Promises. You never break those." Lucy hugged her again. "I've seen what happens to people who go up against this place. It can't be done. You were always braver than I."

"That's not true, you're just hiding it." Mia came out to see her. "The others like you. They're not well. None of them are...none of them are up to standard. But, they'll push until one is."

"You shouldn't be here. You shouldn't be in this at all."

“But, I am here and...we have to make something of this. It can’t be for nothing.” Mia kissed her head. Lucy was a child again. Not a grown monster dressed like a dream. “You’re so different. Do they hurt you still?”

Maybe that was a silly question. Mia looked at her baby sister. Worn down to the pit. Compliant.

“Not as much now. I do a lot for them.” Lucy peered aside again, sniffled and took a breath. Rain sprinkled. Dampening their hair to frizz it later. Bit of a comfort.

Mia hesitated. Smoothing out her uniform.

“Dr. Brenner...they say things about you two. Vulgar things.”

“Mia.” Lucy’s eyes came steady, a plea for her to stop. Her sister swallowed a thick lump and shook her head.

“Is it true?”

“Don’t-”

“He’s touching you. That bastard-”

“No, Mia, no. I’m...” Lucy held herself together. Red eyes lifting. “I started it. I did.”

“He lets you believe that, he lets you believe lots of things. Doesn’t he? He controls everything down to the thoughts in your brain.” Mia’s brow came together. Lucy felt a defense go up.

“Please, don’t bring it up again.” Her reply choked. “He’s nice to me. I like when he’s nice to me. It’s better.”

“Better than what?”

Lucy considered it with wider eyes. Lied.

“Anything. Nothing. Everything.”

“He’s got your leg in a bear trap, Lucy, and you’ll make it out.” Mia

took her shoulders. "Promise me."

Lucy shuddered, eyes closing because she couldn't promise that just yet. Head tipped to Mia's shoulder so they could hold each other.

"Watch out for the people going in and out of this lab. I'm not the only one trying to help. Just wait."

"You have to be careful." Tone lowering, Lucy only sighed. Mia wasn't someone who could be stopped once ideas popped into her head.

"Just trust me."

Lucy could do that much because she loved her sister.

"I trust you."

** ** *

1982

"Usual, Lucy?"

"You bet." She peered up when a glass was set down.

Rum and diet Coke. An artificially red cherry sitting in the rising bubbles. Some baseball game played before her. Jukebox changed songs in the corner. *Hideaway* sat at the edge of town. Cheap drinks. Subject to bikers and drifters passing through.

"You mind?" Some greaseball gestured to the bowl of complimentary nuts sitting near her.

"All yours." The obnoxious crunches grated so Lucy sipped from her glass. Felt his eyes scan her. Down the tight green dress and back up.

"You live around here?"

"Somewhere." Lucy watched the game.

"I'm driving down to Florida. Got my Harley outside, want to check

it out, baby?”

“I’ve seen a Harley before.” A polite smile and side eye weren’t enough for him to leave her alone.

“Ice queen, huh. I bet you never seen one like this.” He touched her arm and Lucy sniffled harder.

“You’re really not interested actually.” Brown eyes darkened at him. A swelter of lavender and mold. Just dashes to make him blink and wander off mumbling. “Turning them to stone would be a lot easier, you know.” Lucy said to herself, blotting her nose with a napkin to ensure no blood fell.

Sometimes she felt like a witch brewing potions.

“Attracting unwanted attention, Luce.” The voice made her jump, head spinning.

“If only you knew the half of it, Jim.” She sighed, sucking the rest of her drink in one go.

“Can I...?”

“By all means. As long as you’re not going to show me a Harley.” She shifted awkwardly when he set his coat aside and took the stool next to her. There was an odd beat of them staring ahead before the bartender approached. “May I have another?” Her head cocked in Jim’s direction. “And whatever the dutiful Chief is having.”

Jim’s brow rose at that.

“Thanks...”

“Sure thing.” The man behind the counter began. “Howdy, Jim.”

“Hey, Ron, usual.”

“Coming right up.” He left them so Jim dug into his pocket for a cigarette. “You mind?”

“Not at all.” Another off beat. “So-”

“The-”

“You first,” Lucy tucked her hair aside. Two grown ass adults shifting and nervous breathing like teens.

“No, you.”

“I...” Lucy wet her lips and paused when two drinks were set. Slipped a few bills to the man. “The other night.”

“Yeah, look, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t.” Lucy shook her head quick. They both drank in tune. “You didn’t upset me, I’m just-”

“Chief Hopper.” A bright face leaned over and Jim tensed at a women there. Big helmet of brown curls and a tiger print dress. “Jim, hi, remember me?”

“Sure, ah...” A signature stressed smile scrunched his face. A long drink of brown alcohol followed. “Betty...”

“*Bernice.*” The pink grin was far from pleasant. “How about the next time you sneak out before the sun rises, you don’t leave my fridge open rooting for beer so my dog, Hazel, doesn’t eat an entire leftover pot roast that she promptly puked up all over my carpet, yeah? Could have picked up the phone and told me you wasted my time.”

Jim heard Lucy slurp her drink behind him, shamelessly listening, and could have died right there.

“...Yup...look, ah, sorry about that.”

“I already sent the cleaning bill to Flo, dick.” She flicked bouncy curls in his face and stalked off. Jim groaned at the thought and rubbed his eyes. Knowing full well the look Flo would be giving him when he came into work.

“Traditional or cremation?” Lucy sipped again with amusement.

“What?”

"Your funeral, Jim." A bat of eyelashes. "We'd certainly have to measure you for a custom coffin, you're quite tall."

"Just burn me alive if you could." His head dropped to his arms. "Next round on me?"

Lucy exhaled out her nose to study him. Those blue eyes lifted and made her smile.

"Why not?"

Fall 1970

"New subjects." Lucy touched a stone pillar and watched the gate open to let cars pull inside. A perfect line like ants. "Someone from the paper too."

"Yes, they're writing us a full spread today. Pictures and all. The first of many." Brenner waited until she turned. "I understand it was messy last night."

"I miscalculated." Brown eyes averted when he gently pulled her jacket aside to see the nasty bruise on her right shoulder. A soft tut from his lips at the sight.

"My poor girl." His thumb traced over the heat of it.

The target last night spotted Lucy and recognized her from 1965. Jumped on her with a knife in a dirty alleyway before Logan smashed a bat into the back of his skull. Pulled his hood aside and wind picked up. Let them both breathe deep. He plucked Lucy's shaken frame up and had Sawyer drive her to the club while their guys handled the clean up. A full night.

"Martin, I can't..." Arms crossed as she shrugged away from him to pass.

"Can't?" He trailed after, walking the stone lines that framed the building together. Trees swayed in the distance as Lucy curled in on herself.

"I can't do it anymore. The killing." She swallowed, pausing to peer

up at his face when they stopped at a corner. She got half behind a column to see him. Almost coy.

“Lucy, you understand why-”

“Five years and I’ve taken so many lives. Five years you’ve kept my sister trapped. Do you know how many people?”

“I hardly think-”

“One hundred and twenty three.” Her voice cut over him. “For you.”

“For the lab.”

“For *you!*” It was a low hiss that surprised him. A hand lifted to painted lips. Fell. Eyes quivered with tears. “I understand I need to protect Hawkins Lab. Our best interests. I will do anything else. I’ll continue the aftermath, the clean up. How many sticky situations have I gotten you out of from that alone?”

Brenner seemed less bristled at that. A sigh and he nodded.

“Quite a few.”

“I’ve killed for you, Martin, who else can say that?” She looked drained there, hair shifting in the draw of wind. Face pressed to cool stone. Nothing to give or take.

“No one alive currently.” It was a peculiar way to answer.

“I think I’ve proven that I’ve rejoined society and I’m not going anywhere. I’ve paid every price this lab asked. I’m in this. With you.” She swallowed and came to him. “Just...please. I can’t take it.” Hands lifted to cup her face. Lucy looked up in the autumn light and caught more flecks of white upon his hair. Starting to take over to the brown in small doses. “Please.”

“I can see you’re worn down, Lucy, and we cannot have that. You will influence when needed, submit to further study, and assist in clean up. The debrief. But, I’ll relinquish that duty from you.”

Because I care so very much.

She crumbled into him. Fingers grasping for his coat desperately, forehead sinking.

“Thank you. Thank you so much, Martin.” She pressed her teeth and came up. Let him wipe a tear away. “Promise me.”

“I promise you.” He stared intent. “Now, dry your eyes. Let’s see a pretty smile.”

Lucy cracked and gave him one.

“Dr. Brenner.” Connie swept around the corner. Spotted Lucy stepping backward. “They’re about ready for you.”

“Of course.” He strode in after her. “Lucy, give me a few to handle this. Follow Connie to the second floor of the atrium and just observe. I prefer that you don’t speak to the reporters. Identify yourself as a visiting college student doing a study.” He stole a guest badge from a desk and turned her to clip it on her blouse.

"My dream role."

"And do not say anything...inappropriate."

Inappropriate like the US government tortures the ill, vulnerable, and poor here?

“I understand.” She followed Connie after Brenner gave a nod and gestured.

“Good girl.” He went another way so Lucy picked up the pace. Skirt flitting behind her.

“Are those new gold earrings?” Connie observed in the elevator. Big and dangly. Authentic, of course. Lucy touched them in a way that was almost insecure. Quickly got over it. “Must be doing well at your jobs. Mortician. Hunter.”

“I consider it more fishing actually. Siren, right?” Lucy clasped her hands as they stared ahead. “Martin gave these to me.”

Connie actually smirked.

“You’re learning, Zero.” She went first into the hallway. Busy atrium set Lucy back five years ago. Subjects gathered with scientists checking them over. Looked a great deal nicer for the visiting reporters to come. There was a sour sort of tension in the air as Lucy went up the steps. Eyes darting all directions when she slowed. “Don’t waste your time.”

“What?”

“Your sister is elsewhere. She works with the more...advanced subjects. Down below. She’s kept quite busy. Smarter than you. Quicker to learn.”

“She always was.” Lucy fixed the belt around her waist, a short brown skirt shifted. Brenner donned a lab coat when he came in leading the reporters. All hanging onto his every word. The bustling didn’t end, but slowed around him and his gesturing. Lips moving to explain the operation. A pen in his hand shifted like he was the conductor.

“Lucy.” That voice pulled her from screaming daydreams and she hated Nolan for it. Swayed against the rail to look at his eyes.

"You're supposed to call me, Zero."

“I feel we’re closer than that. What’s it been, two or three months.”

“Since your last drop in?”

He’d managed to get out into the field again. Rarely tasked with things that involved her thankfully.

Connie stepped around them to go oversee something else so they were alone in the corner here. Watching the lies unfold below. Would make for a great show.

“I haven’t touched you in years.” He cooed, drawing a finger over her arm. “What lovely earrings. You’re doing well. You look pretty. Almost normal.”

"I am. I'm so happy. I play the piano and paint dead people after I remove their organs and clean them out. I make them perfect, you know, like me. I'm perfect." She watched Brenner move down there, managing to grip the entire room with his way of navigation. "And the earrings are from Martin. He gave them to me and then we had sex. Twice."

Nolan's gave this jerk to see her again. A double take as if she'd been joking. Lucy only stared off into the distance.

"You...You can't-"

"Oh, but I can say whatever I want right now because we're extras on the fucked up Hawkins Lab Special. You see."

"Don't ruin this for yourself. You're being a stupid, little whore-"

"Well, you're an extra. Expendable. I'm a leading lady." She didn't stop or waste her breath when he was reeled. "I can tell you that you're never going to touch me again. I can tell you that I've been fucking Dr. Martin Brenner for almost five years now."

"Don't-"

"You'll never get me now. Martin and I screw often enough. Once in awhile as the time went. We both cum too."

"I'm going to hurt you-"

"And you won't stay in the field either. You're so ugly and unloved, it's almost unbelievable. I might even feel pity for you. No one respects you. You're just a joke. I can tell you that you're going to be at a desk until you die and you can't raise your voice or do anything because these walls are digesting us. And today we all have to smile pretty like they're not."

This manic grin crossed her face. Euphoric. Obscene. Teeth and red, plush lips.

"You're helpless like a little baby." She looked at him to rub it in. A challenge. A bear trap. Watched his veins spark out of pink flesh.

Lucy turned on her heel, flicked hair at him. Let him stew and seethe in bleach.

"Sleep well, Nolan."

She followed the metal grate path down, shifting on the stairs when a flash emerged ahead. Brenner and his subjects taking a photograph together. Behind them, Lucy descended at the same time. She wondered if she'd made the shot. Martin's eyes found her.

"Alice, go with Dr. Bradford." He was ushering subjects around. A woman with pupils blown to hell saw Lucy too. Crossed intently. Grabbed her left wrist without warning, lifting it up. Eyes locked.

"Don't I know your pretty face?"

"Let go." Lucy gasped and Alice observed her closer. Thin and gaunt. A smile seeped. Untold wonders behind it.

"Blood runs slick as oil when it pours fresh." She whispered in a cryptic fashion. A doctor shifted to get his subject without fuss.

"What?" Lucy shook her head.

"You'll know." Alice touched Lucy's wrist to her lips. "You're so soft."

"Alice." The doctor tried carefully. "Come on, dear."

"It'll smell like cinnamon." Alice continued quietly, in a hurry to rush out her thoughts. Brenner noticed too and started to cross over. "Save the girl. They need you."

"Who?" Lucy felt her slip away, a thin trail of blood down her pale nose. Alice looked back at her with pointed eyes. A hand grasped Lucy's shoulder, turning her which forced a jump out of poor bones.

"Are you alright?" Brenner loomed.

"Yes, just-"

"Did Ms. Johnson speak to you?" He asked quicker.

"It was mumbling, I couldn't understand." Lucy swallowed and he watched her eyes but let it slide.

"Don't pay the others any mind." His clipboard was handed off. "We'll finish our talk in a moment."

"Dr. Brenner." A young woman appeared behind him. Not much younger than Lucy. Stunning face. Full, high cheekbones and blonde hair. "I'm not feeling well again."

"Terry, I'm so sorry to hear that. Let's have you lie down and someone will be with you in a moment. Connie, see Terry to a room. Let her rest." He called above. Brenner settled a hand on Lucy's arm. Fingers curling.

Terry had this alert way about her. Darting eyes like a raven on watch. She looked at Brenner's hand and followed the path to Lucy's face so their eyes could meet.

"Hello." She held her hand out. "I've seen you around the building. Always dressed so different, so nice. Like a movie star."

"Terry, this is Lucy, she's a contact of mine who works with us." Martin spoke for her.

"Top secret agent?"

"Something like that." Lucy reached out, let their warmed fingers curl. Wanted to scream at her to run. Fly, fly away. Brenner shifted his hand on her back as if he'd heard her thoughts. "Nice to meet you, Terry."

"This way." Connie finished what she was doing and came down, head cocking. "Ms. Ives."

"They'll get you looked at, find out what's been going on." Brenner eased in his collected way.

"Thank you, Dr. Brenner."

His next words sent a strike of lightning through Lucy's core.

“Martin is fine.”

He led Lucy the opposite direction, noticed her head turn to see the woman again.

“What is it?” Brenner picked up the tension.

“Who is she?” Her voice pressed while they went into the hallway. One lingering pause.

“Another subject.”

“Another subject?”

"That's what I said."

"She's not like the others." Lucy felt him still to see her. "Used to be only I called you Martin. That's something signature you do."

"Oh? Are you jealous, my dear?" He asked, touching her chin to ruffle her feathers. It was almost flirtatious.

"What, jealous? No!" These predators, they just go through prey like tissue paper.

"You're blushing." He distracted her.

"We established I'm easily inclined to such a thing. It's not...that. She's special, isn't she?"

"She's guarded, Lucy, like you." Brenner resumed walking so she followed him down. "I've told you not to concern yourself with the others. I'd like you to follow that instruction, you don't need the distractions. You're going straight home after this. No stops. You're going to have a quiet night. Make yourself dinner. Take a warm bath. We have a lot of work this week, I'm trusting you to remain neutral. Especially after the promise I made you."

Lucy tilted her head as if she were dreaming again, hands clasped to her chest.

"A quiet night might be good for me." She said, head bowing some

to look upon him through coy, thick lashes. "Thank you, Martin."

Brenner shifted to continue with her.

"You're busy. I can walk myself, if that's alright." Lucy surprised herself. Touched his arm and pecked his cheek. Left a red print. Eyes met. "Trust me."

She slipped from him. Felt his hand lift up aimless and drop at the loss of contact.

Heels clicked off before Brenner could reply.

** ** *

1982

Lucy was drunk. Not black out smashed. But, more so in the realm of getting up wasn't a great idea.

"Damn lightweight." Jim was snuffing out a cigarette. One idle hand propped her elbow up.

"I'm convinced all diabetics get drunk faster. There's a science about it." She hiccuped. "I talked to *all* the other diabetics and they agreed."

"I'm sure." Jim nodded to the bartender. "Can we get a glass of water? I'll get the rest of her bill."

"Look at you, Mr. Gentlemen." She leaned over to breathe, eyes closing with a lengthy hum. "Is this a new sweater?" Jim paused at her hand on his shoulder, smoothing up and down the knit texture. "I like it."

"Not new, but thanks." He chuckled, sliding a cold glass over. "Drink this."

She *boo'd* him but did it. Eyes rolling.

"This is...the best water. Where did you get it?"

“Don't ask. Keep drinking.” His hand nudged it back. “You drive here?”

“Friend dropped me into town and I walked. But, I'll just run home and get my car. It's all good, officer.”

Jim snorted at her and lit another cigarette.

“Or...here's an incredible idea, I could drive you.”

“You're the best, Jimothy.” Lucy almost missed the counter setting the glass down. “James?”

“My teachers called me James.” He winced, still amused before ashes flicked.

“Can I try that?” Lucy's fingers twitched out and Jim debated it but handed her the cigarette. Let her play up a messy sex kitten. “I used to think it was the coolest thing. All these starlets slowly letting smoke from their lips in the movies. So sultry.”

She sucked. Hitched a cough, but held her breath. Lost composure.

“Don't like it?” Jim pulled his laughter in, shaking.

Lucy made a face and shook her head. Tried to be strong, but it was awful.

“Well, just blow it out.” Jim lost himself this time, snatching it back.

Another less than graceful cough as she turned away to hack.

“It wasn't that bad at fourteen. Ugh, Jim. Oh, no.” She spat a bit of tobacco out into a napkin. Gulpd more while he openly chuckled at her. Earned him a swat. “It's okay, I'll still kiss you after you smoke.”

That quieted him.

“What?”

“What?” Lucy became alert. “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say it, Luce.”

“You...tricked me.” She swayed into his shoulder. “Used your fancy interrogation tactics.”

“You got me.” He pinched the end of his smoke. Blew the rest out. “You keep running out on me.”

“Would you believe that I spook easily, Jim? Things go bump in the night.” Lucy had her hand smoothing up his arm again. Doe eyes flickering with one cock of her chin.

“No, Lucy, actually I wouldn’t.” He pulled his coat on and wrestling her into her own. “Let’s go, drunk. I’m cutting you off. Guess you earned a night of letting loose.”

“Oh no, it’s the cops.” She cackled on the way out. Caught a couple eyes as Jim put his arm around her waist to guide her off. “How’re you not even buzzed?” They paced outside under a night sky.

“You weigh about one twenty soaking wet and I don’t.” Jim got her stumbling along. Brown eyes closed against the fresh air. Neon lights from signs played on her face. He stilled to see the ruby glow. Pulled his Blazer open. “Up you go.”

Her foot wobbled, lifting before she pulled herself inside. Out of habit, he set his hand on her head like he was arresting her. Got smacked off.

“Hey!”

“Sorry, shit, it’s really hard not to do that.”

“You haven’t read me my rights, Chief.” Lucy was giggling. Not stopping when he huffed and shut the door. Jim got in and she was trying to recite them.

“You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be held over you for the rest of your meager existence...” Lucy lulled into him. “Amen... I get it all?”

“Close enough.” Jim turned the engine on, blasted her with cold

air. She moaned, fussing to buckle in before her head was on his shoulder again. "Are diabetics supposed to have that much hard liquor?"

"Probably not." She quirked a sleepy smile. "I won't tell my pancreas if you won't. What it doesn't know will definitely hurt it."

"Yeah...so I'm not leaving you alone yet. Shit."

"Your place." Lucy mewled into him. "Let's go. I want to see it."

"It's a shithole. You don't want to see my place." Jim peered up at the rear view mirror.

"No, I promise. I want to see it. We could have a sleepover and look at the water. I bet it's pretty, Jim, with the moon all nestled in it. Please." She pulled at his sleeve. Inhaled his cologne.

"You'll regret it tomorrow when you wake up in a pigpen. But, alright."

"Yay," Lucy reeled back to celebrate. "Jim's house!" He groaned and pulled out of the lot.

"We're still stopping by your house. Get your meds and clothing. You're in for a rough morning and you're now my responsibility." He veered off, fiddling with the radio. "I've never seen a girl get that drunk as quick as you did."

"It's a living," she fell back into the seat, blinding rolling the window open to breathe deeper, "it's going to storm tonight, can you smell it? The air is almost electric."

"It was sunny the entire..." Jim trailed off when the splatters of rain began to hit the windshield. "Fucking great."

"So much for the moon on the lake. I love warm summer storms too, you know. When the rain is hot. Ruins my hair though." Lucy curled up as they pulled to her house.

"C'mon." Jim got out and hurried around to help his friend.

"If you tuck me into bed, Jim, I'm going to be so upset." She stumbled along. He had to dig for her house keys. "We're having a sleepover."

"I know, I know, pack a bag. Get your toothbrush." He gave her bottom a pat without thinking to make her move.

"I have a lunchbox for my insulin. It's green. Top of the fridge." Lucy giggled and skipped off. Almost a carefree child again. Jim huffed, but grabbed it. "Is my insulin safe in your fridge?" She appeared with a toothbrush and duffel moments later.

"As long as it doesn't mind all the beer." He peered around at the house. Never asked where the family photos had gone, felt like a sore subject. "Let's go, before the store gets worse. And when you wake up tomorrow, just know you asked to stay at my place."

"Your big bear den." She nudged into him. Jim only blew air out his lips, one arm went around Lucy.

"Sure."

** ** *

Drunk Lucy didn't mind the mess that was his trailer. Jim made an attempt to sweep all the cans and paper plates left around in his trash while she draped over the couch. Legs curled up. Eyes alight at the growing storm outside. A nail tapped his window pane to follow the elegant lines of rain. Dripping all directions and chasing each other down glass.

Some western played on the TV behind her. Jim paused with two mugs in hand. Watched her look out with her head sitting on crossed arms. Hair frizzing some since they raced from the car to the house. Dress riding up her thighs.

"Warmed up some coffee." Jim came around and let her take a mug with two hands. "Little cream and sugar to keep you up, that okay for now?"

"Fine." Lucy blew and sipped. Rain beat against glass. Made tiny vibrations. Jim spotted black makeup smudged around her eyes and

smiled. "What?"

"I just...haven't seen you so not put together and relaxed about it."

A snort.

"Ass." Lucy drank again, shrugging. "I don't do this."

"Get drunk?"

"No."

"Sleep with the Police Chief?"

"Next." Her eyes rolled. "I meant, relax."

"You're pretty wound up these days."

"Guess I have to be." Lucy stared at the rain. Felt him looking at her and wondered what he was thinking. "What you said earlier. I run. I can't run far." It was a joke the way she said it.

"I don't want you to feel you need to run," Jim replied before he added even softer, "with me."

Without blinking, Lucy slid her eyes to him.

"Does it help that sometimes you make me want to stop?" Lips lifted when a glimmer cast in her expression.

Stop running and hiding and hurting all together.

"I'll take it for now." *For now* implied he'd seen a future together. *For now* implied he'd seen something. Jim leaned forward to set his coffee down and lightning etched the sky followed by a close crack of thunder. He jerked, sloshing his drink over the side. "Shit." A rag was snatched to soak up the spill.

"Scared?"

"No, I just..." Jim furrowed his brow at the table. "Sometimes it puts me back, you know, back *there*."

“Oh.” Lucy frowned and a second round cut the power off. Jim jolted to his feet with another curse. He must have been very pale under the lure of darkness. Lucy felt sober when she grasped his wrist, feeling for his hand. “Let’s go to bed.”

“Lucy-”

“We’ll hide.” She was up, arms around his shoulders to kiss him. Vibrations emitted from his heart. “Take me to bed, Jim.”

He didn’t need to be told a third time. Clothing was tossed in careless heaps. They didn’t make love. Not immediately.

Clumsily got under the covers. Lucy crossed her arms over his chest and saw the glint in his eyes in the dark. She pressed her skin into his until he felt safer there. Curtains drawn shut. Thin spreads of lightning seeped between fabric ever so often. Jim let himself touch her, hands tight against Lucy’s back.

“Feels like you’re good at this.” He broke the silence. “Hiding.”

Lucy didn’t respond, barely gave an exhale.

“You’re not doing it to sink though.” He rambled to keep his own mind busy so she just listened well. “Not doing it to disappear. This disease, they say people just pile under it until there isn’t anything left. But, it feels like you’re screaming, Luce. And I don’t know how to stop it.” Tone sounded almost raw.

He felt a tear hit his bare chest and only stared at the ceiling.

“I didn’t believe the shit they said about you and Mia and I still don’t. You know that? You went away and something...changed you. And your family, I just...I wish I was there for you guys. Dunno why or how, but something...it’s got a hold on you. True? False?”

“I’m not hiding to die, Jim. I don’t want to die. I don’t want this disease to be the only thing about me. This damn routine. I changed my colors because I had to.” Lucy sniffed, swallowed a lump. “I think about how many people die quietly. I hope when I go that I make lots of noise at least. I’m doing it to survive.”

“Yeah?” Jim rubbed his scruff, exhaling sharper. “How’s that?”

“You get caught in a trap,” Lucy expressed, for the first time, a depth of grief she never dared to touch, “the last thing you should do is wait for the hunter to come finish what is left of you off. I am not prey.”

“What are you, Lucy?” Jim’s felt her unfolding before him.

“Starving.” Lucy’s watery eyes bore an intensity that rippled her vocal cords. Her body heated. “I am starving, Jim.” She paused, sighing and closing her eyes so she could sit up some. Feel him looking back there. “You are starving too.”

Lightning clapped forth again, spreading a glow into the room. Over their intent faces.

“Yeah.” His mouth pressed into a line, eyes averting.

“I’m not even sleepy, you know.” Her head lulled to his sternum, feeling the thuds under flesh. “Used to be I never slept a full night. Not without Mia or my mom and dad creeping in to gently pat me awake. Every single night growing up. I hated it. Know why they did that?”

“Diabetic kids. They go low and slip away while sleeping.”

“Bingo.” Lucy breathed, shaken. “Every night. No rest. None for the wicked.” She hitched at the joke. Felt Jim’s fingers threading into black hair. “And now...I still can’t sleep. I finally have the time to and I can’t. I keep thinking about how I miss it. One of them jostling me until my eyes opened. Until I blurred their figure together and groaned. Not again... I wish...ah, I don’t know. I can’t sleep, but I don’t feel awake. You know?”

She drew her lips up his collar. Felt him tense.

“Still drunk.”

“I’m sober enough.” Lucy kissed his jaw then his lips. Let his hands roam down her body. Thunder boomed again and Jim broke the kiss to peer at the window. Felt her hand guide his jaw back. “It doesn’t

exist. We're hiding. You and I. Together."

Jim craned for her mouth again. Lucy's hand slipped down to explore him. He sat up a little to turn them when her hands pressed his shoulders.

"I want to be on top." Lucy swung an awkward leg over him. Let the blankets slip away. Jim saw her body in a flash of dithering light. Allowed her to be his shield. Spine curving as she sank down on him. "Fuck, Jim." He cupped her breasts, breathing heavily under her. Sheltering him from the outside. Palmed her body till he could grasp her hips. She hadn't had the pleasure of this position since fucking high school.

Rocking experimentally worked a moan up Jim's lungs. He felt her everywhere now.

Fingers pressed into his chest. She fucked him hard. Knew he'd lose his thoughts recalling this days later.

Lucy leaned over for a filthy kiss. Worked her hips into his cock. Wouldn't give him the satisfaction of telling him he was huge and he felt amazing, same way he wouldn't beg for her right back. She found his wrists and held them down into the bed. Grinning, Lucy tossed her head back. Slipping into endless pools of euphoric clouds.

Jim came undone underneath her frame. Lips pushed to kiss her wrist. One simple utter.

"You're so soft."

She cried out. Claimed his lips with absolute fervor.

"Want you to cum inside me." Lucy pushed up. Arched back while she bit her lip. A heat churned inside her. Glittered. One hand found her breast and another guided her hips to sway. He thumbed her clit in tune. Thrusting released up inside her as she bounced.

The combined sensations sparked. Thunder cried out with her. She sank down, splayed atop him. Adjusted so his cock slipped out, still leaking between their stomachs. Tucked under his chin, they breathed together.

“The scar. I can’t have kids.” She blurted. Jim froze, looking around. Unsure of what to say.

“Uh. You...mentioned you took birth control.” *Damn it, Jim, you idiot* . Lucy just chuckled.

“That controls other things.” She lifted up to see him. “They found something wrong with my parts. After the accident. So...”

“Sorry.”

“I’m not too worried about it. I shouldn’t be having a kid of my own either way. Don’t have to pop a kid out for it to be yours.” Lucy settled a lazy kiss under his chin and slipped off to lie next to him. “I just wanted to tell you. Stop hiding certain unpretty parts of my life.”

Jim turned and kissed her all better. Back into the mattress. Pressed his head to her temple, lips tracing down the line of Lucy’s jaw. A broad arm pulled her into his body. Held her until it overwhelmed, but she only burrowed back into him. Immersed herself.

They didn’t talk anymore. Jim let her slip into slumber first. Shifted off to smoke a cigarette by the bathroom window with the storm clearing. Returned to crawl in next to Lucy. Got his arm back around her and pulled the blankets higher.

Remembered what she said.

“Lucy.” He murmured, giving her a little jostle.

“Hm?” Eyelashes fluttered and closed again. A sharp breath drew. “Still alive.”

“Just checking.” He nudged into her. Felt her scoff drowsily.

“You smell like cinnamon.” She slurred, breath catching while she tucked back into his chest and arms to snore softer.

Jim Hopper figured she was just dreaming.

** *** **

1970

Lucy poured herself a small glass of red wine that night. Put the flashing camera and Terry Ives' thoughtful expression out of her brain. Compartmentalized her life the past five years. Plucked up the glass and admired herself in the mirror. Painted and prettied up still from the day.

She pressed a few keys into the piano for *Ave Maria* as she passed it.

Something by Hitchcock played on her television behind her. All the lights were off around the house except the TV and kitchen area. She swayed in her skirts. Sipped and fiddled with the music player until a song bloomed. A peppy one that made her twirl across the room like a little girl.

"I'll light the fire... You put the flowers in the vase that you bought today," she sang to herself, eyes lifting to a creaking across her bedroom floorboards. Steps. Carefully placed but not quiet enough.

A sigh as she finished her wine and set the glass aside. Came around the kitchen island to set her hands upon the counter.

"Nolan." She beckoned. "You don't have to hide." Happy little plucks from a harpsichord picked up. He came out of the shadows on the stairs. Gun lifted. Lucy felt peace thud. Shake her core apart. Smiled like she might be dreaming. "You think you can pull that trigger before I have you pointing it in your mouth."

"I know your timing, Lucy, I'll take my chances. You think you're so fucking special and funny. Don't you?" He was welled with anger, it tremored his entire body. Burned his eyes. "I tried to work with you. We could have made a great team. All the time we spent."

She stared down the barrel of the gun. Licked her lips.

"You're small. As small as you were the day we met." He unraveled. "You're a pet project and we're going to come to an agreement. I won't be pushed aside."

"You're right, Nolan." She shifted out, hands up before they

dropped.

"I put years into you. Into that fucking lab and they think they can stick me at a desk. That experiment was a success and I was apart of that. Apart of you. I'm getting a prize and...and fucking Brenner. You think you can humiliate me?"

"I wasn't aware you needed my help for that, most men I know do it alone just fine." Lucy hummed. Music picked up behind him still.

"Just because you suck his cock-"

"Not all of us have to." A halcyon expression at that.

Our house is a very very very fine house...

"Shut up." He growled low, crossed to point the silver weapon under her jaw. "You're going to shut that filthy mouth. You're going to start doing what I tell you again. You hear?" His hand gave her breast an unpleasant, harsh squeeze. "We're going to feel each other out again. Fucking slut, I can't...stop thinking about you. Your toxin."

Lucy gave him nothing. This evil, it was all his.

"Is that the gun you keep in your desk?" She asked, something jubilant in her tone. Eyes fixed on him. He smelled like a tart, piping hot pie. Delicious.

"What?" Shoulders lowered while hope died.

"The second drawer on the right that you really should be locking. Under the files." Lucy breathed deeper, pressed between him and the island. "Everyone was so busy with the reporters. I made a pit stop when I left. I wanted to see if I knew you, Nolan."

Lucy reached into her pocket, uncurled her fingers to let bullets hit the floor. A musical sound.

"Turns out I did. You're sloppy, of course you didn't think to check. You had hours to do so. Anger always makes us forgetful."

He got one step backwards before a paperweight shaped like a

diamond cracked into his temple. Sent him stumbling into the tile floor.

A mist of blood across her eyes like a mask swept. Nolan groaned the same way Dahlia did. Long, luxurious cracks. Crawling for anything he could use against her. Kicked an ankle out from under her to buy time he already lost.

Lucy filled his veins with lavender and rot. Watched him struggle to press her down into the floor. One knee crushed her stomach.

Another sickening crack sent him off her. A gush of blood splatted her face and chest. His head made this ugly, dull thud. She felt around for a pulse, turning over to realize her heart rate hadn't even begun to sprint. He was alive. Bleeding.

Sticky, red candy between her fingers as she came up on her knees, smudged it across her cheek. Kicked him off to the side. Might have broken a rib because she started and couldn't stop. Teeth gnashing.

Music pounded louder. Lucy stumbled to the phone. Slipped along the floor in a daze like a collapsed marionette, sending the small table over.

Shock picked her pulse up finally. A euphoria swept out her spine. Too many sensations pulled strings in her heart.

The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"I need you. Bring Sawyer." She cut the line and crawled to get up. Blood drenched and comfortable. Nolan was bleeding all over her tiles. Red etching between them almost elegantly to follow uniform lines. A summation of her existence.

Logan Myers skidded up to her house. Appeared around back and rushed inside.

"Lucy!" He stopped to see her kneeling over Nolan. Face pressed to cold tile so she could watch him breathe. Bowed like she was in silent prayer. "Fuck...you okay? Hey."

She let him pull her up, stumbled against the stove to brace her hand back.

"He's alive?" Logan observed. "What happened? Are you hurt?" That was a stupid question.

"He wanted to make love to me, so I hit him." She droned, staring still at Nolan there. "Twice."

"Hey, you're okay." Logan took her face until she looked at him. Got his own hands bloody without an issue because he loved her. "We'll get rid of this. My boys will clean it up. He'd dead weight, the lab won't care."

"How much?" She said instead. Eyes watering as a finger came to her chest. "*I care.*"

"How much, for what?" He already knew.

"To clean up and move him somewhere." She asked and repeated herself. "I care."

"Lucy, what are you doing?" Logan searched that face, head shaking. Her eye twitched.

"He's mine. How fucking much?" She pushed him off. Hands curled into herself. "I need this."

"For you, free. Always." His head dropped with a breath. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I do." She blinked. "I waited." Logan scratched his jaw.

"Shit. Where are we taking him?"

"You already know where." Lucy passed him. "Let me clean up and grab my things."

** **

Nolan Creed woke with his mouth completely dry. A thudding in his skull. Unable to move against binds and drugs. So many drugs,

but not enough to numb.

“Sucks, doesn’t it? That helpless feeling.” Lucy was adjusting her black rubber apron, pulling it tighter. He felt pain in his jaw like his gums were carved up. Lips raw and swollen.

"Mmm."

“What? I can’t hear you, Nolan.” She turned and came to him with no joy.

No life.

“That’s probably because I stuffed your mouth with cotton and wired your jaw shut. Sewed your lips too. I always need the practice.” She plucked up a hand mirror to show him. Red, irritated skin. Saw him hitch and wiggle with fear in his eyes. Warm pie overcame the chemical smell. His bones chilled. Nude and exposed to burning light. Lucy set the mirror aside and came to his head.

“It is...about 8:23pm. I’m in sort of a rush here so I’m going to skip some steps. But, they do say practice makes perfect.” She tapped a thin scalpel between his eyes. Watched him sweat it. Leaned forward onto her arms to see him. “I love this place. I love the process. There are two major parts to embalming a body. Surgical and cosmetic. I have to say I enjoy both. The whole thing just makes perfect sense to me. The process of death.”

Nolan tried to shake his head.

“I didn’t enjoy one second of us though. You and your fingers. Your clawing for bits of me and this insecurity. Did you really think I’d let you put that disgusting thing inside me?”

He muffled sounds at her.

“I know I’m damned and I’m never going to be let out from under this lab.” Lucy went to the counters. Mulled over shiny tools. “But, I suppose it won’t matter. Sometimes, I have to whisper my own name at night so I remember who I am. I can hear the syllables scuttle across the floor like a hungry rat. Maybe I can do something productive with my time. Say I learned something.”

She faced him.

"I'll have to let you know at the end of this." Lucy came to Nolan. Pressed her rubber fingers into his stomach while he shuddered and shook. Helpless there. "I don't think I'm going to make this like a hobby. I just want to feel what you did. See what the fuss is about. In control of something powerful. Taken over by something greater. The exact sensation escapes me. Brenner's pet project. You know, I actually think he loves me in his mind. Isn't that funny? And if not, I'll make him one day. Once I find what I need."

"...I'm not even happy seeing you suffer, it's just a big nothing. I can smell everyone's emotions, but my own." She sighed. "I whisper other words to myself at night. Scents. Emotions. *Murderess*. That's all I am. Doomed siren. I just want to feel again. Something that's mine alone. Feel anything, it doesn't even have to be happiness. You were right, maybe there isn't anything left for me to feel."

Lucy swallowed. Blinked some tears aside.

"Torturing you isn't going to make me happy and fulfilled, Nolan. And I so thought I'd get something." She scoffed, eyes rolling because she couldn't even play this fierce siren or femme fatale they cast her as.

She was still trapped and sick. Still a painted version of Lucy Garland and this would not change that.

He seemed to breathe easier. Blinking at her as little pleas. Lucy met his eyes, frowning and smoothing his hair aside.

"But, it's a start."

"*Mmmf!*" He swore up and down at her. Tried to pry his mouth open and groaned from the pain of it.

"You can't make me feel shit. I just wanted you to know that. And you won't touch anyone ever again. I know I wasn't your only one. It's never like that. There are always more victims to follow. We see each other." She went around him, clinical and poised. Thought of Terry Ives looking into her closely. "Now, I have to do this all out of

order and skip the cosmetic parts I like because I have to be on time for my alibi when they realize you're missing. I'm not worried about how you look either because, well, you won't be found."

He raged at her. Unable to do anything.

"Normally I'd drain you, but I don't have that kind of time. Doing this alive will make such a glorious mess. I'm due for a good mess." She sliced into his flesh to make a hole for the tube. Butter. Heard him try to scream. A wire popped somewhere. Hands plucked up a hose attached to a machine behind her. "I'm going to make you feel something, Nolan."

A flood of chemicals chased into his shell when she forcibly penetrated him. Pushed even deeper. Sent him into convulsions. Spit from every orifice of his body. Made a fucking mess on the table but he was already in his body bag which made clean up a breeze.

Nolan was still jerking and moaning as she glued him shut. Eyes and all.

Lucy rolled through the graveyard where a hole had been dug the day before and deepened a bit ago by one of Logan's guys. A coffin would go over it and Nolan would be lost forever. She pushed the body bag in. Watched it wiggle and still as she plucked up a shovel. Covered herself in sweat and dirt.

"You feel that," she hissed, jerking dirt over, "don't you feel so much better now? You fucking piece of shit." She groaned and wobbled there. Not about to give up until he was gone.

Breathing heavy, she plopped down and let her legs dangle to catch a break. Shoved a candy into her mouth.

"Fucking sugar bullshit." Lucy eyed the gravestone.

"Look. I'm sorry to intrude. Your funeral will still be as requested. I feel bad you have to share this space with him. Just unlucky, I guess."

Lucy pulled herself up and stabbed the ground after she patted the bottom of the hole flat. Laid back into the dirt for a second to watch

the moon, rubbing the filth across her face. Headstones watched on politely when she made a sound, unsure if it was laughter or tears.

Starkly aware that she was *here*.

“Sleep well, Nolan.” She forced herself up. Stumbled back down the path to clean up. Sawyer was waiting in the car for her. Huge and hulking. Settled a massive coat over her shoulders.

"That was fast."

"He leaked everywhere, but I'm handy with crafts. It helps."

His car started playing a cheery song by The Turtles that made her smirk.

Imagine me and you, I do...

“Sorry about the mess in your seat.”

“Don’t mind it.” He turned a corner, rough voice surprisingly gentle.

“Am I like Brenner now?” She asked with a monotone.

“No, Lucy, you’re not.” Came the softer reply. “My dad lived on his own when I was in my twenties. He was old, starting to slip. We couldn’t afford a fancy nursing home he needed. So, this fucking gang breaks in one night. Pasty skinheads types. And they beat the shit out of him with his own cane. He lost two fingers and a leg after that. Stayed in the hospital for months.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And I’d gotten in with Logan’s family. Bouncer. They liked me. And we found every single one of those Nazi fucks. God, I wish I had you back then. Really fucking do.” He peered at her. “You’re special and not because of this magic shit you do. You’re still good despite it. I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to level innocent cities just because you’re angry and you can.”

Lucy inhaled at him, tried not to scoff.

"It's a fucking art, what you do. And some people, Lucy, they deserve it. We're not gods, but we can judge that much with the fucked up shit we see. So, don't ever spend your time regretting it. You move forward and don't worry that they can't. They were never supposed to. Some people don't change, let them rot." He pulled up to a gas station without ceremony and turned to her. A whole new light. "I'm hungry. You want a hot dog and diet coke, sugar?"

She was still covered in filth. Took in his words again. A smile crossed.

"Ketchup and mustard please."

** ** *

The house was immaculate when Lucy set her bag aside. Nolan wiped clean. Ice jostled as she slurped and went up the steps to shower until skin glowed again. Dirt washed down the drain and took some extra time to scrub away.

Hot flesh purred against lotions and a silk nightie. A night of pampering. Lucy turned to the clock and fell into bed. Well after midnight. They made great time. Fingers stretched for an ornate little phone to dial.

"Brenner speaking."

Lips parted. A heavy breath.

"Martin." She stared up at the spots on the ceiling.

"Lucy, it's late. I gave you these numbers for emergencies. Has something happened?"

Yes. You happened to me and now I'm happening to the world.

"I just," she furrowed her brow, "wanted to hear your voice. You're working late."

"Yes." A typewriter clicked on his end.

"I can't sleep."

“Have you been drinking?”

Eyes went to the half empty bottle on her nightstand. She'd dragged it into the shower with her. Easy alibi. Stayed home and drank the day away. Poor Lucy, the town witch.

“Maybe. A little.” Hands swept up the slippery silk of her little gown. A dusty rose color with white lace. “I can't sleep.” She repeated. “Come over when you're done. Are you almost done?”

Brenner exhaled and she couldn't tell if it was hitched because he was annoyed.

“I can't sleep anymore, you know.” She reached for the bottle to gulp. “I watched television. Took a nice, hot bubble bath like you asked me to... I have a belly full of red wine.”

“You know you shouldn't drink that much.” He sounded terse.

“Then come over. I might die if I fall asleep.” That was a lie she was sultry about. As manipulative and ugly as he was.

Come over and fuck me stupid or I'll die if you don't.

The clicking stopped. She became relentless.

“Is this a private line? That why you're not upset I'm speaking out of turn?”

"It is a private line."

"I could touch myself. It's so hot tonight, Martin, and I'm not wearing anything under this nightie. It's sticking to my skin." Lucy's fingers pulled it up over her hips. Edged back down between warm thighs. “I'm already so wet. Hours. It's been hours. I ache when I shouldn't, I always have and I ignored it. But, now I won't and I have you to thank. Are you hard?”

"Lucy-"

"Do you think about me when I'm not there and get hard?" She heaved at him. "Did you get hard when I left your office the day we

met? You knew it wasn't allowed."

"That's enough vulgarity, Lucy. Why are you acting like this?" A weight in his tone betrayed him.

She felt high. Up in clouds. Unspooling blood and brains. Rubies gliding off her skin. Out her eyes and mouth. She recalled blood dripping from the tip of a pencil. Her heart racing.

"Do you need me?"

"I always will." It was a sincere, horrid sentiment.

"Do you love me?" She asked, sounding choked up. Heard his breath catch.

"More than anyone ever could."

Lucy brought the phone aside. Covered her mouth. Such a *Machiavellian* way to say it and still it itched a scratch raw. Tears wet the sheets.

"Can you come over here, please? I need to feel something. I need you." She gripped the phone with both hands. Curling over with a moan. "Fill me up, Martin, just like I do to others. I want it."

"Lucy, dry your eyes and get under the covers." He eased.

"Promise me you'll come over."

"I promise. Give me fifteen minutes. No more tears. Take a deep breath."

At his permission, she did so.

"Okay...okay."

"That's my girl." She hung up the phone, pulled the wine over to gulp the bottle empty. It made the same thud as Nolan's head when it hit the carpet.

Sprawled on her stomach with one arm hanging off. Silk twisted

around a body, barely covering her bottom. Martin thought she might have passed out when he found her like that atop the blankets.

"Lucy?" A hand cradled her slack jaw, bringing it up. She rose to her knees and kissed him. Tasted red. "You're still drunk."

"Ah, and yet, you still showed up." Lucy pulled him down into the mattress.

Martin didn't smell like anything. Just his damn cologne and wash. Flames licked at her skin. Burned layers aside.

She didn't fold their clothing because not much came off. Hands opened his pants. Helped him slip a condom on before he was pressing into her. Lucy whined, pulled at his tie until hands held her wrists down. He hadn't done it before.

"Yes, just like that." Silk slipped to bunch over her breasts.

Brenner had a hungry way about him tonight. Mouth on her neck and chest. Pounding so hard, it hurt. Dulled an ache. Friction worked her up, had her crying out. Shameless about it. No hiding in dark corners. Lucy came once. Maybe twice when he collapsed, trying to take in air. Still holding her wrists in place. Ear pressed firm to her throat.

All better now. Brenner rose off her to fix himself, belt clicking. Eyed her turning over with slick thighs. Silk still up over her breasts, ass jutting out atop the sheets. It was a clear offer for round two and he actually debated it.

Martin didn't tell her not to call anymore.

Lucy's mouth parted. A heavy breath against the pillows. Eyes flicking.

"I love you." It hurt to say it. Like hot stones down her throat and into her belly. A shudder chilled the heat from her spine.

"Of course you do." He stared at Lucy, shadow stretching over her body to hold it.

"I'm going to end your life one day, I think. Not to say I'll kill you, Martin, I'm just going to ruin you." She decided. "Maybe when you love me just as much. I'll know."

"I expect nothing less, my dear." Brenner grasped her arm, twisted her back into his mouth. One hand cupped her jaw there. "Dream a little deeper first, Lucy. I'll let this slide because you're drunk and needy. You don't know what you're saying."

He let go to stand, left her to face the wall and breathe.

"Every single day, I think about how I almost let you walk out of my office. Did you know that?" Martin uttered there.

"Believe me," she scoffed in silence, "so do I."

"You miscounted, by the way." Brenner watched the mirror to tuck his shirt back in and she hummed. "I checked. It was only one hundred and twenty two."

Lucy smirked into the cool pillow, nuzzled it to inhale. Thought of chemicals spilling from eyes and lips. Bursting. What her victims must look like after she's pumped them full. A goddess casting judgement.

"Oh. My mistake."

Notes for the Chapter:

Jinkies. Thanks for reading all, chat with me here or on my tumblr, Alias-B. I really appreciate anyone who's stuck with me. It's a strange time. Xoxo!

10. And Eve Was Weak

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello, everyone! Shorter chapter this time. Sad reminder that Brenner is Not Great. Some quality Jim though.

TW: Abuse, violence, and manipulation. Mental break.

1971

"I don't understand why you're upset, you did the job to perfection." Brenner typed away. Avoided Lucy's eyes.

"I was almost caught. I could have lost my actual job."

"But, you weren't." He said pointedly. "And if you had been caught, you realize what must be done."

"Killing witnesses in my small town. Right. Make things worse. Your guys were sloppy." Lucy seethed until he looked up. Her hands came to his desk carefully. A breath. "When they do jobs close to home, they should have extra care. Having me sneak into Gary's office before he can do the autopsy to...fix it. That's a risk. These people trust me. Your men should have done the job right the first time, Martin. I'm..."

She stood taller to touch her head. Another slow breath.

It was strange to be so bold and yet, Brenner seemed to covet it more and more from her since their first kiss. Within reason and that reason would come.

"Punishment was administered. It won't happen again." Martin eased, stilling to clasp his hands. "I'm very proud of you."

Was that all she wanted to hear from him?

Shoulders dropped.

Not one soul uttered Nolan's name to her in question. There was a bleat of dissatisfaction at that because she even had a lie all ready. Suppose it was fitting.

Insulting too. No one ever suspected women first.

A knock alerted them before blonde hair poked in. Terry Ives. Dressed in civilian clothing with her hand supporting the reason she left the experiment. A swollen, pregnant belly. Almost felt like a bomb might go off.

"Martin?" She spotted Lucy and watch a speck of green flash over her brown eyes. "Oh, sorry."

"We were just finishing up. Come in." Martin swept to his feet, gesturing for Lucy to move without looking at her. "Lucy, take a visit to the garden, there's a surprise for you there."

"Nice to see you again, Terry." Lucy stood, hands clasped. They'd met in passing quite often. "You look amazing. It's true when they say women glow."

"Constantly feel like I might tip over." The woman smiled there. Martin let her leave the experiment after the pregnancy was confirmed. Let her think she was out and occasionally called on her for further interviews about her experiences under the influence.

Offered all the help he could in his way.

"Do you know if it's a boy or girl?"

"Little girl." Terry rubbed her tummy and Lucy moved to offer the seat. "No, thank you, my sister's driving me up the wall with rest."

"Terry, I insist. We have a lot to cover in a short time." Brenner came to pull the chair out so she sighed into it. Lucy stood there watching him looking at her. A chill tensed her spine. "Lucy, we'll speak another day, I'm sure."

"Do you have names picked out?" She ignored him. Wanted to stay with this woman. Didn't want to leave her alone. Not with Brenner.

“Jane.” Terry replied, catching the expression on Lucy’s face.

“That was my grandmother’s name. Wisest woman I knew.”

“Wait, are you...Mia’s sister?”

“Lucy, the garden-”

“You talk to Mia?” Lucy swept to Terry’s side, didn’t look at Martin. Touched her arm on the rest there.

“Doctor Garland, yes, she tells me all kinds of stories. We became friends during my stay. I picked Jane due to her. She really helped me out through... I’m sorry, I didn’t know you two were...”

“Mia suggested Terry take her leave after the pregnancy was noted by her. Always so helpful, that girl.” Brenner’s fingers curled around Lucy’s elbow to lift her up. Hand smoothed up over her back. “Always so full of ideas too.”

“Terry, I hope you and the baby both are well after this. Take care of yourself.” Lucy took the woman’s hands and slipped away as Brenner guided her to the door. Peered back with a silent plea that resonated in Terry’s bright eyes.

“Go to the garden.” Martin pressed his lips and shut the door on her. She eyed his name painted there, traced the letters as she paced off.

Lucy hurried to the gardens before Brenner could change his mind. Saw Mia there waiting to hug her.

“What are you doing?” She whispered when Mia came out, hands still holding each other. “Terry Ives.”

“I helped her. She’s seeing things too. Bit paranoid, but she sees through Brenner and all of them. Just playing nice until she can make her escape. Others...they’ve gotten out. We did that.”

“You can’t do this.”

“You’d help if you were still in here. I know it.” Mia uttered.

Lucy wasn't so sure.

"Tell her to go. Now. Brenner's too fond of her, I don't like it. He was like this with me."

"You sound almost jealous." Mia had paused.

"I am, but that's not the point. Her baby. They want her and her baby. She has to go now." Lucy peered around. "We shouldn't talk about this. Just...I'm worried about you."

"Don't." Mia puffed, kissing her cheek before holding her again. Mouth in her ear. "Terry's gathering information. Others are believing it too. We could bring this entire place crashing down."

Lucy pulled away like her sister burnt. Mia held tight, almost manic.

"Mom and dad were trying to do it, we'd make them proud. Don't you see, Lucy? I was meant to help them. We were meant to end this."

"Dying won't make them proud." Lucy shook her head. "Don't talk about this, not even here."

"He's in your head, isn't he? Brenner." Mia's eyes narrowed and Lucy opened her mouth, eyes flickering.

"No, no, he's-"

"Please, Lucy, I know you. You like this at times. Like feeling in control of something. Well, you're not. He's just letting you think you are. You love him, don't you? You'd rather he kiss your head-"

"It's better than a beating!" Lucy shot back, fists clenching because she's had enough.

"No, it isn't. It's how he keeps you and he'll have you beaten anyways." Mia neared, heating up. "We're finally able to do some good here and you're choosing his side. You act like one of them."

"I am not on his side, I have to act. For us."

"You don't want to give it up. These abilities. This place. The control. When it got our parents killed!" Mia stopped when she saw her sister's eyes change.

"You think it's my fault?" She stated. Quieting to stand taller. "I always knew you did."

"No, I didn't mean that."

"All my life, I grew up in your shadow. Mia got to go out. Mia got to live. Mia could do anything she wanted while I was stuck watching behind glass."

"You're still behind glass, just painted now. And I had to hear about you the entire time. Lucy needs this and that. We can't do this or go here because Lucy isn't well. I can't even fucking escape you in this place! You're all these people talk about half the time. Their first and favorite lab rat. The success! The mighty siren. And they'll keep taking others because of that success."

Because of you.

"I didn't get sick just to spite you, Mia!" Lucy tossed her hands out. "And I didn't leave home to spite you, I needed out!"

"One hole into a deeper one! You didn't think, they clouded you. Sometimes...I...I prayed for you to die, did you know that?" Mia raged back with talons and tears. Lucy gaped at her. "Wished you'd just go silently in the night. Wished I could fill you with sugar just to make it all go away! But, you fought so hard every single time and I need *that* Lucy back. Because she was a beautiful pain in the ass. I need you to fight now!"

"As if I wasn't wishing the same end upon myself!" Lucy pushed her. Got lower. "Maybe you just hate not being special like mom and I."

"Special? Ha! Says the freak. Sugar baby, remember that? At least you fought back then. Fight now." She laughed at that. "Oh, look at you, you're all better now. Faking it. Powerful at last. You know what they all say. My baby sister. Murderer. Brenner's *whore!*"

Whore. The word was ugly and bitter. Lucy slapped Mia. Sent the woman stumbling aside, holding her red cheek. Mia zeroed in and hit her back. Lucy fell into the grass and jumped up, already covered in green stains. Could have been the envy. Dove on her sister until they were rolling around. Smacking at each other and pulling for hair.

Mia was taller and stronger so she pinned Lucy down easily.

“What, are you gonna make me feel things, Lucy?” Mia seethed, crying out as Lucy ripping for her hair. “Make us all feel so you don't have to. So you can make yourself feel better too. It's all bullshit. It's smoke and mirrors and you fell for it! I love you, but you've always been so fucking *weak*! Fight again, damn it! You gave up!”

“I watched them die! I buried them alone!” Lucy writhed, lip welling with blood. “I did horrible things. I just wanted to...to keep you safe in here. You can't do this, Mia!”

“I'm trying to keep you safe, but you're so stupid and these people need us both to fight for them!” Mia smacked at her and they rolled around the grass a few more times until shouts and arms ripped them apart.

“Enough!” Agents pulled the swatting women apart. Lucy skidded back still struggling, fingers pulled at her waist. “Dr. Brenner, sir!”

“Lucy, hands!” The call sent actual pain up Lucy's body. A jolt before she threw herself to the stone walkway on her hands and knees. Not caring if it split skin open. Head bowed. Palms flat. Martin's shoes clicked before her line of sight. A sigh. He calmed. “What is going on here?”

“They were fighting, sir. We don't know who started it.” The agent let Mia go.

Her stare was fixed on Lucy there. Bowing as if she wasn't the most powerful person in the vicinity. It made her furious.

“Connie, please walk Terry to her vehicle. My deepest apologies that you had to see that. We'll pick this up another time.” Brenner crossed back over. The future mother looked on. Met Lucy's eyes

when they lifted to peek. Something knowing and somber in her expression. She moved to go after a beat so Connie beckoned.

“Resume your duties below. Don’t let me catch you both bickering again or these visits we grant out of the kindness of our hearts will end. Am I clear?” Martin came to Mia next. “Tell me what prompted this first.”

“Just been a long week. I was frustrated, sir. I said something I should have.”

“And I hit her.” Lucy started to get up before Brenner pointed her back down. Palms flat again.

“She isn’t a dog.” Mia pressed carefully. “Sir.”

“No,” Brenner said to dismiss it, “dogs obey their masters. I’m disappointed.”

Lucy cracked with tears. Saw them fall to wet pavement. Little droplets that branched out to darken the grey stone.

She disappointed him. Felt like the world could end.

Mia sensed the change and knew this place had eaten her sister alive and that wasn't her fault.

“Lucy knows what happens when she gets worked up. She could lose control. That’s a risk. Do not compromise the safety of the people in this building over your childish spats.” Martin waved his agents back.

“I won’t again.” Mia spoke. “Sisters fight, they still love each other. It’s not Lucy’s fault. I know that.” She wasn’t speaking to Brenner anymore. Lucy dared to lift her eyes again.

“Hitting you was wrong. You’re right.” Lucy found herself, shaking. “About everything.”

Wobbling, she tried to get up again, but Brenner plucked up the garden hose and turned it on. Full blast. Sprayed Lucy until she curled into a soaked ball there.

“Stop, stop! It’s my fault, I goaded her!” Mia fought against arms pulling her off. “Please! Please, stop it! She’s sick! You’ll make her worse!”

“And Lucy let herself be weak. She knows better.” Martin brought the spray aside. Lucy planed her hands down still for him to see. Shaken from the cold. Sopping wet. So easily demeaned before everyone. “Do you know why I’m punishing you?”

“Y-Yes.” Lucy touched her forehead to the stone. “I almost lost control. I was bad.” But, she didn’t. Didn’t try once to poison her sister.

Brenner sprayed her again as Mia was taken away. Back to work. Lucy cried out. Felt like needles in her flesh. The cold made her chatter.

“You’re just like Eve, you know? Plucking that red apple down, pretty as you are. Not thinking of anyone, only yourself.” Martin came to her. Lucy coughed and sputtered. Spine curved so her bottom was up in the air. Face planted down.

“Women are the gentler sex, sir.” One agent offered. A few remained to watch it happen.

“They like us to think so.” Brenner chilled her spine. She couldn’t even feel the warmth of the sun breaking through clouds to bathe the garden. “Lucy.”

“I’m sorry.” She begged, crying. Felt his fingers sweep locks of damp hair aside. Black bled from her eyes. Lucy leaned desperately into his touch while he brought her chin up. “Please.”

“Eve was weak. I expect you to be better.” He offered sweetly.

“I will be. I promise. Please, Martin. I’ll be better for you.” Freezing cold. Dripping. He looked beyond her.

“Agent, your belt please.”

“No, no. Please.” Lucy crumbled into the hard ground.

"You're being punished." Martin stood, gesturing for the man to strike her because Dr. Brenner wouldn't get his own hands dirty. "Tell me why?"

"I was weak."

A hard *twack*. Lucy hitched a sob and cowered. Unable to process much beyond her own cries. Fire spread along her bottom.

"Say it again." Brenner commanded, pointing so the agent hit her again.

"I was weak!"

More meaty thuds of leather on covered flesh. Lucy felt one of her fingernail tips snap against cement. Blood welling upon the tip.

"And Eve?"

"And Eve was weak!" Lucy's scream echoed. Until she couldn't even feel this anymore. Hard hits upon her frozen, wet form. "I was weak! I'm sorry! I was weak!" She buckled on her side after at least twenty-five. Covered her head to ball up again.

"That'll be enough." Martin's voice, so even, brought some awareness back. "Leave us. I have it from here." They all just stared at her. This powerful woman they watched flourish and worked with, reduced again to that frightened child. Vibrating with wide eyes looking at nothing. Beyond the blooming roses covered in thorns and carefully trimmed hedges. Footsteps retreated. "Stand up, Lucy."

She didn't move an inch. Let clothing cling.

"It's alright, you took your punishment. Now stand." He offered it delicately too.

Lucy pressed her arms down to push. Managed to get one foot under herself. Then, the next.

"There's my girl. You can do this." All sweet encouragement.

Head bowed still, she stood. Heels clicking damp pavement. A mess

of soaked clothing that dripped down. Hung off her frame and made her look even tinier.

“Look at me.”

Brown eyes shut tight.

“Lucy.” He wasn’t impatient. Slowly, those dark eyes opened to see his face. “You understand that you needed to be punished?”

“Yes.” She blurted.

“And my affection is unchanged. I forgive you for forgetting yourself. I always will. You did very well. I don’t like to do this, especially not in front of the others.” He set his hands on his hips, head shaking. “No more fights. No more giving into these parts of yourself. Control and routine is everything to you. It’s what’s keeping you alive. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Martin, I understand.” She brought her hands into her chest. Curled. Freezing cold. Knew a sickness was coming.

“Now, drive yourself home. Get cleaned up. You’re going to sit on the couch and wait.” He touched her back carefully and started to lead her drenched form out.

“Wait? For what?” Lucy, breathless, held herself. Made her feet move even though it hurt. The shivering stopped, but she knew she was still frozen and in danger.

“Go.” He walked her as far as the door and held it. Stared down at her there looking small. Lucy shuffled out and tried to be poised as if nothing was the matter. Air nipped her skin all the way. Water seeped along the car seat. She stared at the wheel and reached for her keys.

“Miss Garland!” A hand smacked the window and Lucy cried out. Terry Ives. Big blue eyes and a hand gesturing to the lock. “Please, open the window.” Lucy blinked at her, head shaking. “I just need a minute.” A heavily pregnant woman was slapping her car, trying to open the door.

Lucy cracked it.

“Terry. Please, get into your car and go. I can’t help you.” Lucy gripped the wheel, refusing to look up, and Terry paused.

“What happened to you?”

The same thing that’ll happen to you.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Things happen inside this place. Unexplained things. There are others. Gloria, Alice-”

“Terry, please, just go.” Lucy turned her head looking a mess with almost dangerous eyes. “We can’t be talking. I’m not supposed to talk to the others. None of them. Just leave. Take that baby and go away from here. As far as you can. I know what happened to you in this place because it happened to me too. But, this lab...it holds us and it doesn’t let us go once we’re in. So run while you still have that chance.”

Lucy looked at her belly.

“Hell, maybe you don’t anymore.” She started the car, growing tearful. “I cannot help you. I’m so sorry.”

“If all of us try-”

Lucy wept to herself and peeled out. Not hearing Terry’s pleas any longer before she wove through the lot and out the gate.

Made it home somehow and scrambled up the stairs into the bathtub, turning the water up hot. A cry pulled as it hit her back and bottom. Wisps of blood went down the drain. Clothing ripped and peeled off, plopping over the side.

She reclined into the floor sobbing. Rocking under the steaming spray.

Unable to scream because of what it meant if the world heard her.

1982

Well beyond six in the morning, Lucy woke with a grunt. Darted up in a bed that wasn't her own smelling of Hopper's wash and cologne. Naked and twisted in sheets. Light blared in. Made her cover her eyes and groan. Exceptionally hungover. Makeup smeared the pillowcase and she bet her face looked about the same.

"Ugh," she rubbed her head and blinked a few times. Heard the door creak.

"Hey, you. Figured you'd be panicking by now at the state of this place." Jim had pulled on a pair of jeans and undershirt. "You remember getting drunk and begging to have a sleepover, right?"

"Ah, shit...yeah. It's all coming back." She didn't stop the sheet from falling and grabbed a coffee from his hand. "My hero. Thank you."

"No, thank you..." His eyes trailed down for a shameless look. Lucy snorted to herself and drank.

"How bad was I really, Jim?"

"Still cute when you're smashed." He shrugged, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Held it well."

"That gives me no ease." Another long drink.

"It's why I'm here." He winked at her. "Insulin is in the fridge. French toast okay for you?"

"Yeah...yeah..." She shuffled up. Into the daylight nude. Stretched before the bathing sun rays. Jim's eyes trailed down the curves of her frame. He finally spotted them. Light dustings of scars. Like tiny slashes. From her back down her bottom and thighs. He knew she'd run if he asked. That only dawned more questions.

"I didn't know you had a tattoo." Hopper offered instead as Lucy set her coffee aside. A hand slapped to her wrist. "Sorry, I took your

watch off when you passed out.”

“Yeah, just some silly end of high school dare. You know?” Lucy twitched a grin at him.

Strange because she wasn't particularly close to anyone in high school, but he'd be a prick to point that out.

“Sure.” Jim watched her slip the gold band back on. Lucy avoided his gaze and began picking up her clothing.

“This place isn't as bad as you described.” She said, going to her overnight bag when Jim pointed it out silently. “Can I use the bathroom?”

“Yeah, no...I'll let you clean up.” He remembered himself and stood. “Follow the smell of food when you're done.”

“Can't wait,” she came to peck his cheek, “thanks.”

Jim's eyes lowered as she left, shutting the door behind her to leave the air thick around him.

Leaving him to wait.

** ** *

1971

Waiting. It was agony. The pain only grew worse. Lucy couldn't dress herself. Managed a bra and underwear. Felt around the walls and thought they might be digesting her all over again. Bleeding syrupy blood.

She rattled. Cold again because she'd forgotten herself. Fell into the living room carpet in a state. Chattering and whimpering.

Waiting. It drove her to insanity.

Lungs shriveled together. Came apart. Tiny fractures echoed out from them. Fingers and toes shrill with cold. Head pounding.

Fire. All together. Glass shattering within her flesh. She imagined porcelain skin cracking elegantly. Hitting the floor to create a symphony of sound. Delicate piano keys plucked.

Mia hated her. She disappointed Brenner and he was coming to see her. She got her parents killed and followed that line with more corpses. A pile of bodies in her wake. Dripping and cold like she was now. A bloody legacy with only death.

Lucy cried out. Hands and knees on the carpet. Rocking forth and back. Waiting. No room to breathe. Screams that were silent, unable to hold. The silence that was maddening forced her mind to create the music. Vast and flowing. It built. Dimension upon dimension.

Spine curved. Her head tipped to the carpet. Crying so hard, everything clenched and sputtered. Unable to stop the flow. The music. Shattering her synapses until they burnt. Panic gripped like children's hands upon her limbs. Begging.

Out of the symphony came figures. Blurred together. All younger. A dream during the attack. Wide eyes lifted.

“Keep playing.” Kristen. Skin grey like marble. Thin fingers touched Lucy's chin. She was fracturing too. Couldn't stop the anxiety and cold. Lucy felt her even still. Lifted up. Kept crying, trying to scream but the sound was cut out because she had no air. Lips opened in horror. More marble figures came around her. More hands skimmed over flesh.

Olivia. Mia. Terry. Dahlia. All those people. In and out of the lab. People she ended. Innocent and guilty alike.

Lucy covered her ears. Tried to curl up and hide but they pulled her arms out. Made her see. She came up on her elbows. Inches from Kristen's glassy expression. Her lips opened too.

A scream because Lucy couldn't. More followed. All different keys, splattering along a perfect octave. Red threads connecting each of them sympathetically. One beating heart that pulsed. In and out. Waves like an ocean. Colors danced. Lucy swayed. Inhaled. Came back. Exhaled. Let them wait for her.

It felt like a great kindness. To scream for someone who couldn't.

Kristen cried for her. With her. Touched their temples together. Hands and bodies swarmed all over her like a cocoon. In and out. Dahlia wailed loudest. Held Lucy's face in her bloodied hands.

Could have been minutes or hours. Lucy floated there. Waited in chaotic bliss. Hawkins couldn't hear her, but these ghosts could. And she heard them back. Fingers dug into Kristen's arms. Cried into her. Braced to finally let a scream of her own out until...

"Lucy!"

The colors billowed out and away. Bird's wings opening to take flight. Martin Brenner gripped her elbow, yanked her from the music and back into reality. She hated him for that most of all.

"Lucy, calm down." He got her into his lap. Deranged and panicking. Shaking with anxiety. Inconsolable. Slapping at him. Martin smothered Lucy holding her down to dig into his coat. Plucked her neck with a sedative he always kept on him. Let her sink into sound and color again.

A chorus of angels screaming and dying.

It was beautiful.

** ** *

Fingers wiggled against soft cotton. Lashes fluttering. Lucy felt weights under her skin pressing down. Tongue slurring against teeth.

"Wha-ss 'append?" She turned her head. Saw a burst of color. Flowers in a waiting vase. Violet hyacinths bundled together. Pretty little bells. Briefly, she heard them ring.

Lucy felt her blood pump slower. Tried to push herself up.

"Ah, careful now. You have a fever. Slept for so long." Martin came into the doorway with a tray. "I changed you and got you into bed for some needed rest." He set the food aside and came to her. "My poor girl. All broken down so I can build you up again. We've done

this dance for so many years.”

He loved it.

“Mar...tin...” She wheezed, brown eyes flickering.

“We took the liberty of calling you off work for the week. The Crawfords send their love. Such understanding people, you should be so thankful. Took ages to find an agent who sounds like you, Lucy.” Brenner propped her up into plush pillows.

“Flowers.” Lucy’s hand inched out toward them. The drugs numbed the pain some if anything.

“I brought them for you.” Martin took one of her hands in his. “I realize that I miscalculated.”

Lucy blinked at him. Flooded back. Breathed heavier to get the words forced out.

“Being a diabetic weakens my immune system. You...You sprayed me with freezing water. Hypothermia weakens immune systems too. You got me sick.” Her chest sunk. Every pore ached. He touched her flushed head and sighed. “You did it in front of everyone.”

“Yes, I imagine that was humiliating. You’ve come so far, Lucy, and to snap. To backtrack that growth. You’re better than that.” Lips came down to touch her knuckles. Tears welled at his gentle touches. “Do you like the flowers?”

“No. I don’t like flowers.” She said, sniffing. Her face felt puffy and stuffed. “I can’t keep them alive.”

“Enjoy them while they last.” Brenner stood to gather the tray. Set it before her carefully. “Should be cooled enough to eat.”

“You made me chicken soup?”

“Yes.” Martin got up to go. “Eat it all. I’ll be downstairs.”

“You’re staying?”

"We've been swamped and I neglected you. I'm going to remedy that." Blue eyes flashed at her. Lucy observed him. Didn't say thank you. "I'll be just downstairs if you need me." He pressed his lips and paused again.

Dropped the bullshit.

"That panic attack. The worst I've seen in years in all of our subjects. What prompted it?" Brenner and his cold, collected eyes. Drinking her in. Holding her from across the room.

You caused it.

"I lied."

"About what?"

Everything. Nolan. Terry. Mia. Me. Us.

"About when I said I didn't pity you," she choked through tears this time and Martin came closer, "you remember that?"

"I haven't forgotten a second of us." His palm cradled her cheek, thumbing her tear aside. Martin sat back down. "Don't cry."

"It hurts." Clumpy lashes shut tight. *All of it.*

"That's the last thing I want for you." He did something peculiar. Dipped down to lie his head upon her lap. Lucy's hands lifted with uncertainty. Maybe dread. "I made you so unwell. I push because I care. I don't want this hurt for you. I'll put everything into making you well again."

Lucy opened her eyes. Stared at a crack in the wallpaper.

"Then, why are you always hurting me?" She touched his back. Felt his arms wind around her hips. Hushing her little whimpers.

Why. Why. Why. She wanted to scream and didn't. Imagined the delicate floral wallpaper peeling to show more fractures underneath.

"You don't understand how great you can be. That breaks my heart."

Martin lifted to see her eyes. Still never apologized. So, she said something else. Pointed as she could.

"I do pity you."

"Do you?" He searched her closer.

"I have so much of it inside me just for you too. Only for you. I can't escape it. I realized that as I got older." Lucy took his hand to nuzzle the palm and smell his cologne. Lips pressing when his thumb swept them. Thoughtfully seeping under Dr. Brenner's bone marrow. Reeling him in with a silent siren's song.

An arrow pierced Martin Brenner's heart for the first time.

"I pity you, Martin, because you have to wake up every single day and be you."

He recoiled from her. Jaw setting while his eyes searched. Felt the jab bleed.

Decided maybe he owed it to Lucy to leave the arrow there and bleed just a little. Was that love?

A sorrow wafted from her soul. Genuine as can be. Lucy's somber expression penetrated. She reached out to cup his jaw this time, ghosting a smile because his eyes got heavy at the mere caress.

"I hope that's some comfort to you." Bold and pricking his skin. "Whatever you see in me that you need to possess, I'm sure it loves you back, Martin. It's all you've got in this world and that'll never change. Not even when you leave me behind." He covered her hand and breathed deep, actually shuddered. Didn't fly into a rage at her sweetness.

"Thank you, Lucy."

Strange. He thanked her for the awful truth. Brown eyes shifted, fingers followed the trail into his hair before she sat back. Dreamy.

"Your hair is going all white, Martin. I like it." Almost angelic.

Brenner blinked several times when his eyes glazed, breaking a thread to stand and stiffly go to the doorway. No more words followed. None. Just his gaze on her serene expression before the door clicked shut.

There was something illuminating about getting the last word. Like the echo of a scream.

An easier breath left her drained body.

** ** *

1982

"This might actually be the best french toast I've ever had." Lucy crossed her ankles and leaned forward. Cutting small pieces with her fork. Pulled a plain dress on. No stockings. Hair damp. No paint upon her face. Smiling at Jim across the little table.

"That's just the hangover talking." He covered his slices in thick syrup.

"Quit the station, make me breakfast for every meal." Teeth flashed when she smiled, looking down at her plate before she took another bite. Jim broke a little, forking half a slice into his mouth. Both of them relaxed. Jim marveled at her there, so pretty and hungover and not at all bothered by his messy trailer. Looked like she belonged there across the way.

"Not like they'd miss me at the station." He reasoned. "Probably let Flo take over, she's been gunning for my job for years I think."

"Oh, she put me up to this." Lucy joked. "All part of the plan to overthrow you."

"Guess, I'll thank her." Jim was charming when he wanted to be. Lucy hadn't seen the damper side to him in awhile now. It was awful after he got back. Understandably so. She did observe a slightly lax state that followed with his pills. Maybe too lax.

"You know," Lucy peered outside and took a bite before gesturing with her fork, "I think I'm going to do something unexpected today."

"Unexpected." Brow furrowed. "Yeah? Like what?"

"I don't know." A giddiness jumped from her. It made Jim smile again. "Something small to start maybe. We'll see."

"I have to run into the station for a bit. Finish some stuff up I neglected before Flo actually does off me." Jim paused, shifting food around in a puddle of syrup. Lucy stared elsewhere, swallowing. "Hey-"

"I-" She stopped at the same time, warmed. "You first."

"Tonight." Jim struggled, intent and nodding. "Dinner."

"Dinner?" She repeated. "You and I?"

"No, Flo and I." He got a playful push there. "Ah, yes. Us."

"Why?"

"Because we're adults and I assume we both like dinner." Smooth one Jim.

"Like...Like a-"

"No! I mean, it doesn't have to be anything big. Just casual. Friends...going to dinner." He rushed out in one breath. Lucy sucked on her bottom lip, let a breath out.

"Friends. Okay. What time?" She watched Jim relax.

"Six?" He smirked to himself. "I mean it. Casual. I pick the place."

"Long as you don't try to kill me, I'm in." Lucy agreed, twirling her fork around. Felt Jim's wandering eyes and glanced up. They never pitied each other. Just brought each other up when they could.

A smile crossed in tune and she wondered if perhaps, she'd grown weak for him. But, this. This perfect moment where they shared a space and meal together. Where Jim Hopper felt his world wasn't closed in and where Lucy Garland knew she could face the day with him in her orbit.

It was the strongest she'd felt in eons.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, thanks for reading and chat with me if you have the time! :)

11. A Tale Of Two Sisters

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey guys, I'm back. Sorry, I haven't been around. My stories are still going for sure, I'm just trying to go easy on myself as I post. I really wanted to give you guys a chapter this week. More transitional. You'll get Jim in the next one!! TW: Abuse. Just major abuse and Brenner's manipulation. Lucy's unhinged mentally and that might unsettle you.

1971

Lucy's raw throat was worse after the nap. The tray had been taken off at some point while she slept. She moaned a little and turned in a haze. Head thudding and hot. Sweat beaded along black hair. Silk nightie clinging to twist around like a second skin. Dark outside as she slept the day away.

"Poor thing." Martin's voice roused her some more. A cool towel blotted her head. Lashes fluttered around red rimmed eyes, lifting. "I do hope you keep the food down. Come up. It's time for your medicine." Thick, disgusting liquid was spooned into her mouth. Hot going down. The damp rag swept her lips after. "There's my good girl. Lie back down, sleep it off."

Brenner turned when a hand snapped around his wrist.

"Please." Barely audible, Lucy's chest rose and fell. A beat. Brenner basked in how much she needed him again. Hate him all she wanted, but still come to him first when she's in pain.

"Very well." There was shuffling. His coat and tie folded aside. Legs shifted next to her. Sitting upright against the headboard, Martin felt her burrow into his side with one arm slung over his hips. She stopped to inhale cologne on his shirt.

It wasn't enough to pretend.

Eyes shut tight. Fingers tucked hair aside and came to rest on her shoulder.

“Go back to sleep and dream.” He said softer. Lucy didn’t try to argue. Just let herself fade in and out.

Woke at nine to feel him still there. Tracing his fingers up the notches of her spine. Roused a purr.

Midnight. Brenner was propped up still with a book in hand. Lamp on next to him. Lucy shifted and fell again after he gave her head a pat.

One in the morning rolled around and movement alerted a body next to her still. Warm behind her own. She decided not to turn.

Three blared on the clock when she woke with her sinuses cleared. Fever broken.

Weak and dizzy, she roused to the same body next to her. Brenner in his undershirt and briefs. Under the covers. Asleep. Strange sight.

The man slept so soundly for a murderer. For all the evil he brought the world. Maybe it was inappropriate that it caused her jealousy. She made out his features in the dark. Martin on his back with one hand flat on his abdomen. Breathing nice and easy.

It was the first time he spent the night with her. Stayed in bed. Lucy slid out and crept into the bathroom. Showered the sickness from her bones. Short black locks dripped onto hot skin. She stared at Brenner and dropped the towel. Crept around in the dark. Naked as can be. Free. Felt eyes all over her body and ate a pear over the sink as if she never tasted food. Ravenous while juiced dripped down her neck and breasts.

Hands felt into a drawer, metal scraping before fingers closed around a wooden handle. Dizzy, she walked in a trance. Taut and still. Back up the steps. Darkness loomed and Martin was undisturbed there. A blade in Lucy’s hand caught the starlight to gleam. She crawled back over him, quiet as a mouse. Felt him stir when she straddled his hips and raised the knife high.

It would have been so easy. One well placed hack into his neck or chest.

She could watch his organs utterly betray him same way her pancreas betrayed her and rallied the rest of Lucy's body to do so. Watch his heart beat and scream blood all over her expensive sheets. Bathe naked flesh in it until she was sticky as strawberry syrup.

Tension sprang up her wrist. Teeth clenched.

He opened his eyes and didn't even jump. Woke and made out the curves atop him. Felt a bead of water drip upon his shirt. Saw the knife and didn't drink in her nudity. Not yet.

"Well?" He sighed. Gaze casting to Lucy's own. "Are you feeling better, Lucy?"

"Mentally or physically?" She pulsed, chest heaving.

"You're beautiful." He said instead, saw the blade quiver. "I hope you know that." Tone changed. "I meant, physically. You'll never be mentally well, Lucy. I made sure of that. Did I not?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to kill me?"

"I'd like to," she welled with tears, "same way I'd like to eat my fill of cake and ice cream on my birthday."

I want to and I just can't do it.

She couldn't touch him the way she wanted. Influence him. Pick him apart. Not with his hands stark and white around her throat constantly.

His finger trailed up and down her hip idly. Muscles went taut like a spark cast into them.

"You're shaking. Put the knife down on the side table and get under the covers."

“Would you even bleed if I cut you?” She held steady there, scoffing tearfully. “I bleed, do you bleed?”

“Is it so easy for you to think I’m inhuman?” Martin sounded almost wounded. Hips gave the slightest push into her. Lucy’s eyes grew heavy and clouded at him.

“No, you’re human, just like the rest of us and that’s a terrible thing.” She heaved, eyes elsewhere before the blade lowered. His fingers shifted to take it, dropping it behind the clock on her nightstand. Shoulders sagged, her voice got small like it was fighting through something thick. “I’m too weak.”

“No, you’re not.” Martin felt her slip from him, back falling into the mattress. “You’re the strongest woman I’ve ever known. It’s magnificent.”

“I’m glad one of us is so certain.” Lucy turned aside, let him cover her body to warm it up. Fingers wrapped around her elbow, tugging her onto her back. A hand touched her forehead.

“Fever broken. That much is good. I won’t allow you to push it. Your immune system is so fragile.” Fingers trailed down her cheek.

“You did this to me. All of it. And I thanked you.” Her voice rasped. Eyes elsewhere. “I can’t stop.” A hand was under the blanket. Lips hushed her, pressed her cheek then jaw.

Lucy always understood how easily sweetness could kill you.

“Always dwelling on the past, Lucy.” Came the murmur as her breath hitched. Fingers pushed between hot thighs. Coaxing her open. A flower in full bloom. Unfurling in her chest. She saw the petals falling to rot. “I want you to live right here. In this moment. Yes?”

“Y-Yes.” Brown eyes glazed, heavily hooded at him.

“With me.” He propped himself up, threading fingers into black locks. Hips shifted up into his touch. Wanting for more. “There?”

“Yes.” She whined. “Please, Martin.”

“Do you deserve it?” The grip began to tighten into her hair.

Tears beaded out the corner of her eyes. A shudder.

“No.” That fucking thrilled him to pieces. A number of things crossed her mind and none of them mattered while he rubbed slick circles.

“Let go.” Hungry lips pushed into her mouth. Drowned her.

A spark when climax washed at his coaxing.

Lucy arched up, head tilting to let a moan free. Drawn out of her lungs with too much ease. She pulled for him, got him atop her as they kissed. Hard and bruising. Not a care in this world while it festered.

“Martin.” Nails scratched his back. He reeled from her. Got up to feel around for a condom as she turned over.

“Lie back.” He snatched her wrist.

“No, fuck me like this tonight. Just once.” Lucy moaned into the sheet and wiggled to entice him. “Call me a whore and a murderess. Pull my hair. Hit me. Just fuck me like you think about when I’m not around you.”

“You’re losing it.” He gasped, hands on her hips to drive into her. “Hold the headboard.” Fingers scrambled up, gripping tight. Mouth open into feather pillows. Crying out without a care. Sick glee filled Lucy to the brim. Hard thrusts drove her higher. Brenner slowed when the muffled sounds caught him. “Are you laughing?”

“How can I not? I’m already dead and so are you. We’re damned, Martin.” She pressed back into him. Pushed up a little holding the headboard which made muscles ache. “I’m the doctor’s *slut*. That’s what they all say. And when I leave this world, I’ll be watching you from hell with all those dead babies in my arms.”

“Be quiet.”

“Put your fingers in my mouth and make me, Martin.” Came the

challenge. "Fuck your little lab rat nice and proper. Like you designed me to fuck." Her head turned to see him still, furious eyes watching her grin and bear it. "Acting all high and mighty when you screw me as if it isn't fucked. Why not let go?"

"I'm warning you now."

Lucy's upper half fell back into the mattress. Humming.

"Maybe you don't want to feel like one of *those* guys. Rough in the sack and treating girls like cattle. Dirty, evil men. You know, guys who pay for it. Like the men that used to pay for sweet m-

"Lucy, shut the *fuck* up!" Brenner shoved her into the mattress. Sprang over her body to hold her down into the bed so she'd look at his eyes glinting. Two pieces of hot coal. He'd never said such a thing. Never lost control, not like this. Her hand quivered and came to her face.

"You made me. You paid for *this*." She pecked his cheek. "And you crave me. So, take it." Arms got around him, easing him into her body. "I have you, I'll make you feel so good." Brenner pushed back inside. Let her cling for once. Gripped her right back with his face buried into her neck. Hands under her back. Squeezing. Slinking down her body to press her legs wider. "There, that's it." Hips pushed together. Slow at first and then harder again.

He kissed Lucy partially to quiet her.

"I'm sorry." Lucy shattered. A new light flicked on. They both shuddered together. "I don't know what's happening to me." He kept hushing and kissing her. Smoothing hair aside. Fucking her into the bed painfully, it felt too good. "I'm so sorry, Martin. I'm not me. I don't mean these things. I can't stop it."

Apologizing to him of all people. That made the kisses taste bloody.

"I always forgive you." He promised. They rocked together. Both silently crying. Foreheads touched and another bout of climax consumed them until lungs gasped. Lucy couldn't stop crying soft and sweet underneath him. "You're good, you're just so good." His mouth

kissed her all better. He held her there too close. "Lucy."

She swallowed, sniffled to quiet. Watched him above her. His lips quirked.

"Thank you, Lucy." He stilled her world. Lucy's brow knitted together. A sigh left her lungs. He never explained why. Just wiped his own eyes and got off her.

"Martin, I-" The phone blared behind her. Lucy yanked a sheet over her breasts as if someone caught them.

"It's late." Brenner observed, eyes on her before he nodded to let Lucy answer. Stretching, a hand plucked the phone up carefully.

"Hello?"

"Zero, put him on the phone." Connie was in no mood.

A nervous sigh.

"Ah, Connie... Who?"

"Lucy, the entire staff is well aware he's *screwing* you, put Dr. Brenner on the phone now, god damn it!" Came the tense reply. Lucy pulled the receiver away to offer it. Defeated.

"It's for you."

Martin bristled some but snatched it.

"Brenner." He listened well. Eyes wandering before he straightened in one snap. Entire demeanor changing. A hand swept through his hair. "How long?" Lucy curled up there, unable to hear the other side. "Yes, I'll be there as quick as I can. Keep eyes on her."

The phone smacked down.

"Get up." He pulled at her elbow.

"Martin, please."

"You're not being punished. We need to wash and dress. Right

now.”

“What’s going on?” She tried not to resist, stumbling after him. Weakened.

“Terry Ives is going into labor.”

*** ** *

1982

“Miss, can I help you find anything?” A sales associate approached Lucy near the window display.

“Ah, no. But, thank you.” She clutched her purse and waited for the young lady to wander over to another customer. Lucy fought the urge to bite her nails down and sighed.

“This is so...silly.” She teetered around awkwardly. Grabbed what she needed and tried it on. “Holy shit.” The anxiety of this made it worse. “Okay...okay. This is happening.” Lucy plucked up a few more things, paid, and hurried back to her car. Setting the purchases beside her.

A naughty thrill rushed as if she bought something made of leather or lace. Found herself biting her lip and wondering what Jim would think. A school girl before prom.

“Christ.” She sped off back home. Laid out the clothing on her bed. Paced around. Pulled tags off and put them on. Turned around a mirror to admire herself.

Denim jeans. Maybe it wasn’t a big deal to others, but Lucy Garland hadn’t worn pants since she was seventeen. So it felt a big deal in her mid thirties. Like she was breaking a rule.

“Okay...okay.” No garters. No stockings. No heels. No blouse in a skirt with a belt tight around her waist. Just comfy shoes and socks. A nice, fitted green top to tuck into the high waist. Lucy bit her lip. Put on jewelry that wasn’t given to her by Brenner.

It was easy to laugh at herself there. Acting like this was forbidden,

maybe it was. Hawkins Lab controlled everything she did. It felt like a step away from them. Not to say she didn't enjoy feeling opulent. More, she just wanted to feel like herself. Feel pretty like it wasn't a mask.

Lucy pulled a coat on and decided to take the look for a test run into town. Went out to face the day again as the sky began to clear further. Bits of sun seeped through clouds to touch her skin. Lunch seemed like the best idea so she drove to Benny's place and walked in with a huge smile.

"Hey, you." Benny perked up at the sight. "Cheeseburger and fries?"

"And a water, thanks." Lucy leaned over with her head cocked like he was supposed to understand. Benny just beamed and punched it in.

"What's got you giggling?"

"You have to guess. I'm different today." She pressed her hands down so he debated it.

"Ah, you look pretty. As always."

"Benny." She whined, shoulders falling. "I'm trying unexpected things."

"Extra pickles on the burger?"

"Yes, please. But, that's not it." She leaned out, hands up. "I'm wearing jeans." Lucy said it with budding excitement. Like heaven opened.

"Oh!" Benny laughed, head shaking. Almost blushed. "Earl, boys, get a load of our girl, Lucy. Wearing jeans today."

"I'll be damned!" Voices and laughter overlapped. "Let's have a parade."

"Hey, it's a big deal. It's been like seventeen years!" She dropped her arms, earned some claps. "Thank you, gentlemen, that's better."

“You look good though.” Benny paused to stammer. “I mean, you looked pretty before and you’re still pretty. That’s what...I’m trying to say.”

Lucy curled a smile.

“Thanks, Ben. You’re sweet.” She crossed to a table. Read the morning paper to herself and waited for food. Benny set cutlery down with her food as he always did for her. “I won’t need the knife.”

Lucy picked up the burger and smeared her lipstick biting into it. Benny’s brow rose when she sighed.

“Did I ever tell you that you make the best cheeseburger I ever tasted?” Lucy chewed, covering her mouth with a napkin.

“Always nice to hear again.” He chuckled. “You feeling alright?” The back of his finger touched her forehead. “What have you done with our Lucy?”

“I’m new and improved.” She shrugged, thoughts on her dinner with Jim tonight. “I’m just...happy today, things feel vibrant.”

“Well, it’s...a good look on you. Keep it up.” Benny winked and paused when another customer entered. “Enjoy.”

“Thank you.” Lucy dug into her fries.

Let elegant hands get greasy and ate with little care. Fully alive.

1971

“I need some air.” Lucy wiggled in the passenger seat.

“It won’t be long.” Connie flicked through a magazine. Daylight broke the sky into blush and tangerine pieces.

“Why am I here?”

“You work for us. This is part of the work. Dr. Brenner wants you to see, he trusts you. More than you’ll ever know.” Connie sighed. “Mistake if you ask me.”

Lucy didn't disagree.

"I feel sick. I need to stand up." Lucy pushed out of the car. Sleek and black.

"Get in, don't make a scene."

"Connie, just shut up and let me hate myself in peace for a second." Lucy snapped back. Connie sucked in her cheeks and looked amused, going back to her magazine. The hospital loomed there. Abnormally quiet for what all was happening inside. Lucy spotted a murder of crows all looking at her when wind cast through her hair.

Doors swung open below. She turned away at the sight of Martin Brenner, dressed in his usual expensive suit and carrying a bundle. More men and women in civilian clothes and hospital garb trickled out of other exits. Leaving the scene.

"Martin..." Lucy trembled there, eyes on his face and not the blanket when he climbed a couple steps.

"Hold out your arms, Lucy."

"I don't want to." She teared up so he got closer. Martin pushed the bundle into her until she cradled it.

"You should be happy," Martin nestled it into her arms and Lucy forced herself to look at the silent baby there. Sleeping. Pristine and unknowing of how terrible the world was. "You always wanted a baby, did you not? Look at her. The innocence alone takes one's breath away."

"Martin." She sniffled, unable to catch his eyes. He stared at that baby like she was his whole world.

"A baby. Yours and mine. Mostly mine after this day." He turned. "Get the car set up to go. We're done here." Agents passed around them.

"Martin," Lucy quivered still, "do not tell me you cut this baby from that woman. Don't tell me that."

"Terry's child didn't make it." Brenner tucked some of Lucy's hair aside. She cradled the baby close to her chest. "These things happen." He went to go oversee the transport and Lucy cupped the side of Jane's little covered head. Bowed to kiss her soft temple. Inhaled lavender.

"These things happen," she burst softly, "because sick evil fucks like you don't stop them."

Martin whirled to see her, shock upon his face.

"You're disgusting. I hate you. I hate you so much."

"Lucy. Calm down." He pulled the bundle from her shaking frame and Jane began to weep. Powerful, red cries in his arms. He scowled and handed her off to be taken away. Those wails woke something up inside of Lucy. She reeled forward and slapped Martin so hard, his taller frame stumbled into the car.

She'd done it in front of everyone. Eye for an eye. Stood there waiting to see if they'd fire on her.

"Sir!" Many went on guard, but his hand waved to stop it.

Brenner held the red swatch and pointed with his other hand.

"Get in the car. We'll discuss this later."

"Later? When is later, Martin? After you have me whipped and then bring me flowers so I let you screw me!"

Dead silence. Lucy looked wild and feral there.

"Maybe you'll be bold enough to come on my face and tits like you want, huh? Spank me, call yourself fucking daddy, fuck my ass. I don't care! I'm fucking game, aren't ? Because you designed me to play and play rough. Your little siren." She saw the burn creep up his neck. Humiliated him. Eyes averting because she was embarrassing Dr. Brenner before his following. "All this death, all these people you send into your mother's arms. When is it my time? When you realize I won't replace her? When your new toys look shinier?"

Lucy got up close to him, practically on her toes. Spitting venom.

“You will *never* see her again!” A white hand shot out, fingers wrapping around Lucy’s throat to yank her higher. With her windpipe clamped, no sound cried forth. She held Brenner’s wrist while he snapped in a way he never had before. Not in front of his agents. All these people beneath him.

Lucy looked into his eyes. Lips lifted there.

Yes, show them who you are. This monster you hide under flesh and nerves and bones.

Martin seemed to come back to himself. Inhaled sharper to let her go, sending her stumbling and coughing.

“See Lucy home, she’s forgotten herself and needs a reminder.” Brenner fixed his coat and turned. Lucy got one step backwards before a needle plunged into her neck, sending all the lights away.

** ** *

“...such a pity about Alice, I know you were there to witness the accident.” Brenner’s voice mulled gently.

“I hardly think frying your own brains to death is an accident.” Mia spoke with no emotion. Eyes elsewhere. “Sir.”

Mia.

Lucy gasped awake. Body a pile of boneless limbs. Brenner’s office sparked memories. Jane Ives crying so hard.

“Lucy.” Mia swept to her side from the seat in front of Martin’s sleek desk. He stood to see them. Lucy draped across the couch whimpered.

“Away from her.” Neither girl moved. Fingers clutching at fabric. Lucy felt around to hug her sister. Brenner had an icy stare on his face, shifted to lean against his desk. “Artemisia. Come back and sit.”

“Where’s Jane?” Lucy hissed.

“Jane died.” Martin shook his head.

“The baby. The baby you stole out of her mother’s body. Where is she?” Lucy tried to push herself up, leaning on Mia for support.

“Oh, you mean Eleven.” Martin gestured again to make Mia move but she wouldn’t. “It warms the heart to see sisters so close. Mia’s a bright light here too. Proving herself over the years. And, Lucy, perhaps it’s a younger sister thing...she’s been quite the brat this year. It’s my fault for trusting she wouldn’t act out when I gave her certain freedoms. A better standing. And she was warned that her sister would pay for her insolence. She must not love you, Mia, as much as you love her.”

“That isn’t true.” Lucy charged, held back from falling by Mia’s arms.

“It must have been hard, Mia, to have a little sister who was ill. Who kept the attention of your mother and father growing up. With all your talent and accomplishments. They never paid off.”

“I understood why.” Mia had spat.

“But, emotions are inevitable. Normally, I’d have you punished for Lucy’s mishap. But, I’m realizing that doesn’t work.” Martin pressed his lips kindly and pulled a belt that had been sitting between them on his desk. “I have an exercise to help you both work through these issues.”

He made a loop and offered it to Mia.

“What?”

“Hit her.” Brenner offered. Mia narrowed on him, head shaking.

“No.”

“If you don’t strike her hard, I’ll have someone come in who will do it harder. Twice as long. And then, Artemisia, they’re going to punish you all the same. Lucy, do you want your sister punished?”

A switch flipped. Pain stabbed Lucy’s head until palms were flat on

dark cherry leather.

“No!” She choked, shoving Mia off to lift her skirts. “Do it, just do it. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You have to, it’s okay. It’s okay. Just do what Martin says. I was weak.”

Martin crossed his arms, appearing pleased with Lucy.

“This isn’t Lucy.” Mia seethed at last. “You conditioned her until nothing was left.”

“Only the pretty parts.” Martin grew thoughtful at that.

“I stole mom and dad. Hit me.” Lucy begged, nearly inconsolable. Breathing uneven and shaky. “The little baby girl. You have to protect her. Mia. Mia, do you understand me?”

They locked eyes and something resonated between sisters. Lucy shook with an erratic breath.

“You have to. So, just do it. I deserve it. Do it! Hit me! I was weak!”

A whip through the air sent meaty leather into Lucy’s bottom. A sound so loud, birds would have flown the coop to avoid its echoes.

Mia clenched her teeth to still tears that poured hot.

“You’re not, Lucy.” Another hard rap. Lucy curled there, stunned. Head bowing. “That little girl who was loud. Who wanted to fight and play piano. We should have stayed in the treehouse and never come out. And...I wanted to hate you, but I couldn’t. Even though, I thought mom and dad liked you better. And you got them killed! You did this, all of it!”

She kept swatting at Lucy aimlessly. Striking her back, bottom, and thighs. Rousing screams that were heard by agents all up and down the hallways. They knew to turn and keep walking. Brenner watched Lucy’s expression, calm beyond belief.

Too many smells hit at once. The burnt rubber of fury. Maybe a twinge of gasoline from contempt. But, no envy or hatred. None. No waft of bleach or sewage saltwater. Mia looked at her and she understood perfectly. So, Lucy cried like she meant it because it would mean a painful disconnect.

Lucy would not be able to protect the child of Terry Ives.

But, Mia could.

Hawkins Lab trusting them both was the only thing to be done about it.

Even if it meant losing each other.

“That’ll do.” Brenner coaxed when he was satisfied. Lucy curled up there sniveling. Mia turned her nose up, handed the belt back.

“You are weak.” Her sister faced Brenner. “I hope this new one won’t be.”

Martin smiled at that. Like the damn sun came out. Revelation.

“I have a good feeling about this one. Resume your duties.”

“Don’t bring her back here. I need to think about it, where we stand. My sister is dead. She died with my parents and this *shell*...” Mia stood over her. “She’s all yours, Doctor. You want her, so take her. I don’t care.”

Lucy crumbled there. Gripped the leather seat as tears wet it. Mia gave a pained scoff, eyes averting. Brenner was kind enough to hold the door for her on the way out.

One look cast and burned.

Protect Jane Ives. From this place that would digest her.

Mia swept into the hallway. Martin’s eyes turned and Lucy covered her face. He snatched up a tissue box and crossed to sit by her there.

“You understand why I did what I did?”

“Yes.” She reached to take the box. Crushing it to her chest. Pulled a wad out to clean her face some. “I lost control. I was bad. And you punish me...because you love me. Because you care so much.”

A shaken breath pulled. Lucy pushed her body up, let the tissues fall aside before she was getting into his lap.

“You’re all I have and...” A delicious monotone. “I won’t take that for granted.” *I'm all you have too.*

“There, there.” Brenner held her. Gentle rubs and soothing words. Lips on her hairline and ear. “I am sorry about your sister. She’s done well for herself here. I will not stunt her growth. Not even for you.”

Hands cradled Lucy’s face. Thumbing mascara aside. She wiggled, straddling him.

“It hurts.” A quaking burn sent nerves twitching all up her body. Howling with sizzles.

“Yes, it will hurt for a while. And you’ll heal and learn to do better.” Martin coaxed her in for a slow kiss. Tasting of salt. Lucy curled her fingers into his shirt. Felt tiny there against him. He let her tuck under his chin. Brown eyes on a crack in the wall behind him. She imagined the room crawling to pieces. “We have to get you home. I have a lot of work to do here and you need rest.”

Lucy wordlessly slid from him. Tried to stand and trembling legs. Thought her ankles would give out. Stood perfect and poised before him. Until he smiled.

Brenner walked her the long way out. Too many eyes saw her expression. Lucy staggered occasionally. Tried not to display the pain.

“Dr. Brenner, I can take her home if you like.” Dr. Simms came from a room with a pleasant face on. Lucy jolted into Martin, looped their arms together.

“I have her, not to worry.” A hand patted Lucy’s knuckles so he led her further. Helped her while she limped ever so slightly and said nothing.

She was trying her best to work through pain. That was just something women had to do.

Hold down the whimpers because sitting in the car hurt like hell. Martin played a song for her and ran the air conditioning. Pulled up to her house under a crystal blue sky.

"Take care of yourself. I'll check in. Do not go back to work early. Take this time to rethink things." He reached over her and unlocked the door. "Be good, Lucy."

A sigh.

"Thank you, Martin." Numbing, she got out. Paused. "I want to show you something. Please, come inside my home." Lucy was already going without looking to see if he followed. The engine cut. She didn't wait for him to shut the door, digging into the coat closet for a box.

"I know I'm not allowed to give Mia things." Lucy sniffled there. Eyes unblinking, almost manic as she shook. Contorting fingers holding the box close when she hunched slightly. "I bought this hoping to beg you to give it to her for her birthday. Maybe Christmas." She offered it.

A side look and moment of hesitation before he stepped forth to open it. An cream colored antique painted box. Ceramic with a metal clasp. Ornate and tarnished from time. A Rococo flair like puffs of dreamy clouds. Bluebell and blush swirling designs. Black and white swans painted along the side.

"Isn't it pretty?" Lucy touched it, grazing his fingers. Noticeably quaking under her skin, unable to hold the world. A nervous hand touched her lip.

"Yes, Lucy, it is." He eyed her there. Scared to touch the gift now. "Very pretty."

"Like something the Queen would have put Snow White's heart into." She gestured so he opened it. The tune struck. *Ave Maria*. A little maiden spun on a coil against a tiny mirror. Red velvet covered

the inside. "Look at her. Do you know why her eyes are closed?" Periwinkle dress. Back arched like a ballerina upon one foot. Painted lashes with a calm expression.

"Why do you think?" He seemed enthralled. Softening.

"She's dreaming." There was a crack in Lucy's unhinged smile. Fingers curling and uncurling. Unable to touch anything. Unable to grasp. "In her own perfect world. I wonder if she's lonely."

Brenner stilled as she reached for his hand. Guided it to shut the box again so the tune dwindled to silence.

"I want you to have it." One pat and Lucy turned to shut the closet door.

"Me?"

"What was the last gift Amanda got you?"

"These little characters made of tin. My favorite was the army major. I loved them all even when the paint chipped and their little bodies dented."

"I'm sure they loved the little body who gave them a life inside his imagination." Lucy wavered some. Thought of a distant shore rocking back and forth. "Put it somewhere you can see it and remember. Like a secret. Yours and mine."

She never said exactly what. Perhaps her carved out heart was inside.

"It's lovely." Martin turned. "I'll keep it special and I'll see you soon, Lucy."

"She's dreaming." Lucy uttered instead. Eyes lifting as he paused to peer back. "But, I wonder what happens when she wakes up."

Lucy's expression there was burned into Martin Brenner's memory forever. A wild sort of calm. A coming storm. The first notes of a siren's song when you're still aware and knowing it's too late.

"Sweet dreams, Martin." *You'll need them.* She only clasped her hands there. Waited for the door to shut and locked it. Didn't peek to see him pulling out. Back to Hawkins Lab where a newborn was trapped without her mother. Terry Ives must be crying herself raw. Screaming.

Awake.

A record played with some fiddling. Music filled the room until Lucy gave an idle, slow spin. Swayed about with her arms lifting. Pain and life alike seemed so far away. She sang along too soft.

"In dreams I walk with you... In dreams I talk to you."

Lucy crossed to the fridge while the song played on and drank some orange juice from the carton. Let it drip upon the blouse. Swept her arm across her lips and caught the treehouse there. Waiting.

Unsure of what compelled her, Lucy dug for a hammer and went out back. Stood there under it. Pulled her screaming body up to snap the lock off. Ankles wobbling. Sought comfort inside and let her clothing tear on loose nails and branches. Allowed dirt to scuff fabric as she groaned and wiggled in. Mia's magazine cutouts were withered yellow. Few toys in a steel box. Her green bunny pulled close to inhale a metallic, earthy tint upon the fur.

Her mother mentioned the treehouse before she died and Lucy avoided it until this day. This hour.

"You don't belong here." Fingers traced the line of a chest her dad used to keep in the basement. Dust pulled when it clicked open. Lucy excepted family keepsakes. Clothing. Anything but what she found.

Newspapers clippings. Audio tapes. Tossed together with dates and names. Lucy realized all at once how hard her parents tried to save her. Gathering what news and evidence they could to bring the lab down.

A click.

"Mia. Lucy." Olivia's sweet voice made her daughter choke. "If you're listening to this then all I can say is I'm so sorry. Dad and I

weren't enough. But, I hope you're on the other end because that means there's hope still. This place, it eats people and spits them out. If they're lucky. Maybe you can succeed where your parents failed."

"...Mia, if it's you. Lucy's been stolen into this...experiment. I'm still trying to make sense of it. Daddy and I talked to so many people and every single one was terrified. Some of them...they were mutilated. Lucy, I hope you hear my voice and know that none of this is your fault, this place looked for you. Something inside you is special and that called them home. God, I wish I told you that years ago. I sheltered you, baby, and that was wrong..."

"...I'm so scared I won't ever see you again. One or both of you, please. Fight back, someone has to fight back. We started finding people connected to this place. So many disappeared. Some were brave enough to tell us things. There will always be more of us than of them. Believe that. We hoped that by gathering enough..."

"...Dr. Brenner. He's almost inhuman. We saw his victims, and god, Lucy... I can't..." Olivia wept softer on the other end. "He cannot have you. You hear me. Not one piece. You take it all back. I know you can."

"Lucy," Donald began because his wife could not go on, "we know you're out there and you'll come home. You and Mia have to stick together. Artemisia, you'll get through this. We won't stop until we're all a family again. Inside this case is everything your mother and I gathered so far. Hawkins Labs. This doctor, Brenner. His crimes began before this place. We hope that one day it's enough to shut that hellhole down. To stop what they're doing to these families."

"Do with it what you will." Olivia picked up again. "We know you girls will do the right thing. Be brave and be as kind as you can. We love you both so much. Raising you two was everything. I'm so proud and I hope you know we'll always be there if you need us-"

Lucy clicked it off because the rest was too painful. She covered her lips to cry silently. Sniffled harder and dug around. Lawsuits that were raised and put to rest. People who were silenced.

She shut the case tight. Pulled from it to hold the bunny close.

If she were smart, she would burn the treehouse down.

But, Lucy was angry and she was maybe a flicker hopeful. So, she snapped the lock tight. Touched the Earth again.

Saved these works for a rainy day that would come years later.

After a gate opened.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for being so patient with me while I care for myself. Chat below if you have the time or shoot my a message on my tumblr, Alias-B. I also posted the teaser for my new Billy fic, Angel Cake.

Thanks again! ^_^

12. An Affair To Remember

Notes for the Chapter:

I've been on a roll again with this fic so I wanted to push another chp out! My eyes just burn looking at this, it's going out! Lucy and Jim go on a "totally not date" Date. :) TW: Brenner and funeral scene.

Fall 1972

Lucy hadn't seen Mia since the birth of Jane Ives. Almost a year.

Hadn't asked about the little girl. Not yet.

She got one phone call with Mia under Brenner's *careful* supervision. One visit after breakfast.

"Take as long as you need." He kissed her head and handed the phone over. Lucy gripped it with two hands. Felt his eyes on her back.

"Mia... Hi."

"Lucy, I'm incredibly busy here." The clipped tone still chilled. Lucy almost believed it. An ache penetrated through her chest despite the pretending.

"I just...wanted to hear your voice. I'd like to see you. I love you."

"I know."

"Will you see me if I come in to the lab? Please."

"Lucy, I...I really think this is for the better." There was a whimper on the other end from a toddler and then a dial tone. Lucy stared at the treehouse and lowered the phone. Martin crossed with a grave expression and took it.

"Don't take it personally, dear, people move on in life. They have to."

“Some of us linger.” Lucy was entranced at the dancing of fall leaves. The light sprinkles of autumn rain. Didn’t shudder as Martin kissed her neck. She turned and found his lips. Wondered if maybe she was saving another from his mouth and hands. If Martin was the type.

He never forced Lucy into bed physically. In fact, he backed off whenever she declined or panicked. But, Brenner would certainly find another to play with. Manipulate their clothing off and make them fold it before their hands were clutching at pillows. So, Lucy kissed him with more force. Pulled him into the darkness of her bedroom until release captured them both.

“You’ve made me proud this year. I feel you’re back to your old self again.” Martin faced the mirror an hour later to do up his tie.

Lucy held out for a few months after her break and sickness. Cut him off until he came bearing more and more sweet gifts. Jewelry. Latest tech for diabetics. Clothing. Better doctors. Arms that held her closer and closer. It was intoxicating. His care was all she got behind closed doors. Sometimes he dressed her in jewels and satin and laid her down. Unwrapped her like a gift from him to himself.

“The weather was so pretty today.” She offered instead. Warm rain still hit the window. Sun illuminated and rainbows crossed. As the sky fell, it all washed away. “I hope it lasts.”

“Be good, Lucy.” He took that as his cue to go. Kissed behind her ear before he went.

“You too, Martin.” Lucy rose when she heard the door downstairs and showered. Hot water couldn’t wash such a man from her skin. She finished her routine and went into work. She always brought the paper in for the Crawfords. Handed it to Frank as she passed him going into an office.

“We’ve a new one to put together this week. Abrupt. For the Hoppers.” Beverly was making a pot of coffee in their makeshift break room. Lucy’s heel skidded.

“Did you say the Hoppers?” Hands pulled three cups down.

“You didn’t hear?” Beverly quietly thanked her and filled them. “Oh, I’m sorry. Walton passed last night. Heart attack.”

“Walt. Jim’s father...Oh.” Lucy sighed more to herself. “And Beatrice?”

“They told me she was confused about it. You know, her memory is starting to really go. Just awful.” Beverly picked up two cups while Lucy dressed hers. “Jim already called last night. He’s coming down to make arrangements. Should be here within the hour or so.”

“I haven’t seen Jim in years.” Lucy’s tiny spoon clicked the mug. She set it in the sink and sipped. Blotted red lipstick on the edge. “Since my own parents passed. He got married, I heard.”

“Big city detective now. The body needs picked up from the hospital. Jim insisted we set up the funeral tomorrow. The week was open so we’ll make it work.”

“I can get him.” Lucy nodded. “You and Frank prepare for Jim.”

“Perfect, Lucy, thank you.” Beverly hurried out with two mugs. Plucking up a body was a simple task. Lucy took the van up and they loaded it quick. Black body bag and all. Frank met her at the back door.

“I have it, hon, go on and help Bev inside.” He pulled the bed forth until wheels hit the ground.

“Of course.” Lucy clicked inside, heels quickening.

“And we have a beautiful mahogany finish-oh, Lucy...” Beverly turned with two others. Lucy’s eyes went to Jim there. Clean shaven. Broad. Wearing a nice green flannel tucked in, a brown coat, and dark jeans. One hand on his belt and a hat in the other. Those stormy blue eyes cast and took her in. Watched her fingers clasp together.

He seemed to take a beat to recognize her.

“I apologize, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Frank sent me in.” She eyed the woman there. Jim’s wife. Blonde and done up. A pumped ponytail that left long bangs framing her face. Bright eyed and lips

painted a lush pink. Diane, if Lucy recalled from the wedding invitation. Dotted blouse tucked into wide slacks.

In her arms was a baby girl. Almost resembling Jane with those huge eyes, but they were blue to match her parents. One tiny curling ponytail sprung up from her soft head. A toy to chew on clutched in her fist. Wide awake and curious about the world.

“Lucy.” Jim stepped forward. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“Lucy’s worked with us since ‘66. Been our saving grace. She’ll be the one to get your father’s photo and clothing to.” Beverly gestured. “Lucy, if you want to stay with them a moment. I have the catalog in back.” She was already moving to go.

“Of course... Hi.” Lucy tucked her hair aside and looked down. “Heard you were a big city cop. Badge and all... My gift. You wear it out.”

Jim lifted his hat and nodded. Lips pressed.

“The Garland girl?” Diane smiled too. “Your old friend.”

“Yes, this is her. Lucy.” Jim crossed. Taking Lucy’s shoulders to see her. She gasped a little at his big hands gripping her suddenly. Like he never left. Like a lot of things never happened. “She sent me the hat. I grew up here with her and her older sister.”

“I hoped it fit. I figured a cop needed a good hat.” Lucy beamed. Let Jim hug her even when she went stiff at it. An awkward pat found his back. “You got even taller, I swear.”

“Wear higher heels.” He joked, pulling her into the room to meet his family.

“Diane, right?”

“Yes, nice to meet you.” They shook hands. “Jim’s talked about you. He was down you couldn’t make it in for the wedding.”

“I so wanted to go. I hope the gifts came in time.” Lucy laced her own fingers back together. Remained a few steps away from them.

"They did. We use the electric kettle and Tupperware once a day. And Jim doesn't leave the house without his hat." Diane adjusted the wiggling baby on her hip.

"Hides my thinning hair." He'd joked.

"And who is this?" Lucy smiled at the little girl.

"Sara. Turned one in April. She took her first steps last month." Jim swept an eyelash from her tiny cheek. Looked like the sun there.

"She's beautiful. Congratulations." Lucy had offered sincerely.

Jim was happy and fulfilled. Living. That was beautiful too.

"We still debate on whose eyes she'd got." Diane spoke. "I wish I could be seeing Jim's hometown under better circumstances."

"I'm so sorry for your loss." Lucy bowed her head briefly.

"Mom's taking it the hardest, she just seems lost." Jim agreed quieter. "Diane and I are going to get her some help, you know, professional help. After the funeral."

"We'll make sure Walt's taken care of. If either of you need anything, I'm here to help." Lucy looked between them as Beverly came back in with a large binder. "I have some preparations to do. If you'd like to see your father, Bev or Frank will show you back."

"I have the picture and suit picked out. Left it on the front desk." Jim touched Lucy's arm. "I trust you."

"Nice to see you again. You have a beautiful family," Lucy grazed his knuckles and came to Diane.

"Thank you, Ms. Garland."

"Lucy is fine." She smiled again at Sara. "Lovely to meet you both." Heels retreated and Diane shifted to hand the little girl off to her daddy. Jim kissed one chubby cheek, eliciting a giggle.

Lucy lingered in the doorway and left them to finish the selection

for the funeral. Met Frank in a back room after snagging the items Jim brought, old photo and grey suit.

“I have it started if you want to grab your apron.” He began while Lucy cleaned up and prepped. “Is it strange seeing your friend?”

“Yes,” she turned only to show him her smile, “but, I’m happy for him.”

** ** *

1982

Jim didn’t recognize the Lucy exiting her house this day either. Huge, sunny smile. A green blouse covered in black birds with the sleeves rolled up. Tucked into fitted jeans.

Jeans. Pants. No garters, no skirt.

He blinked several times as she got in casually with her purse.

“So, what did you have in mind?” Lucy buckled and Jim shook his head. “What?”

“Lucy...?”

“Jim...?” She sized him up, dusty rose lips and a hint of gold shadow upon dark eyes. Made her glow there even still. “You said causal. I listened. I have that mode.”

“I’ll be damned.” He started the car again, chuckling. Wore a grey patterned button up and jeans himself. “I’m sorry, my head just exploded.”

“Everyone is being so dramatic.” She scoffed. “Is it that bad?”

“No! You look...you look great. It’s just different.” He put on the air conditioning and pulled out to the street. “I don’t know, Luce, you always find ways to surprise me when I think I have even a fraction of you figured.”

“Well, I gotta keep you on your toes.” She played with his radio

and sat back. "So, where are you taking me?"

"You'll see. Bit of a drive. Next town over." One hand gripped the wheel while the other came down to rest upon the seat. Lucy took note and peered outside at the passing trees. The glitters of sun between huge clouds.

"Ooh. A secret."

"It's no place for a starlet, great food and drinks. Something for you on the menu, I'm sure." He shrugged. "There's one rule and I won't tell you until we get there."

His hand shifted idly to her knee. Smooth move.

Lucy smiled again.

"Okay, but I'm trusting you, Jim."

** ** *

1972

Music droned with wandering people. Gathering near the flowers and casket. Jim stood up there to see his dad, decided to close the lid. Diane's hand clasped in his tightly. Lucy lingered in back, picking up loose pamphlets.

"Where's Walt?" Beatrice Hopper peered around so Lucy went to sit by her. Frail as can be. "Mia Garland? Is that you all grown up?"

"Lucy, Bea, do you remember me? I used to play on that big tire swing you had when we all were young."

"Lucy, yes, honey. Have you seen Walt?"

"He's resting, darling." She eased. Let the mother take her hands.

"It's almost time for his shows. You know that man would lose his head without me around." The old woman swayed there. Same vibrant blue eyes as her son.

“I’m sure.”

“Are you still dating, Jim, Mia? I always knew he’d be happy with that Garland girl.”

“No, ma’am. Sorry.” Lucy giggled. “Not me. He married Diane. She’s the pretty one up there.”

“That’s so nice. They...had a baby. My first grandbaby.”

“Yes. Sara.” Lucy patted her hand and the woman paused.

“Walt’s not coming home, is he?” She blinked, remembering. Came to Lucy’s shoulder when she said nothing. Just comforted her. “We still have that tire swing.”

“That’s wonderful.” Lucy patted her back. Looked up at Jim as he spotted her, appearing grateful.

Interacting with his mother had been a painful affair. She couldn’t care for herself. Burying his father and putting his mother in a home was wearing him down this week. Another relative took over so Lucy shifted off to straighten a bouquet of flowers that was slipping down.

A whimper from Sara across the way had Diane slipping out into the hallway. The baby spit up on her shirt so Lucy snatched up some cloth napkins and followed.

“Diane? Here.” She offered them to the mother.

“Thank god for you, oh, could you hold her?” Hands offered the little girl. Lucy awkwardly shifted and took her. “I promise, she’s done spitting up. Ate too much at breakfast and all the stress has got my poor girl confused.”

“I can imagine.” Lucy adjusted Sara on her hip. Watched the little girl eye her and grin. “Hey, you. Gorgeous little girl.”

“You have kids? A husband?” Diane was patting her black blouse down. Trying to get the puke out.

“No, afraid not.” Came the idle reply. “I guess you could say I’m

married to my work.”

“That’s fine too, it’s the seventies. We do whatever we want now, right?” Diane spoke in jest to lighten the day. Sighed at her shirt.

“So, they say. This one’s going to be smart, I can tell. She strikes me as very observant.”

“She’s a curious one for sure, can’t imagine what the teenage years will be like.” Diane dropped the rag aside. “I wasn’t very well behaved for my parents.” She took Sara back.

“Eh, I tried my best not to get caught.” Lucy’s joke made Diane smile again at her.

“Thanks.” She huffed. “No boyfriend sweeping you up though, I’m sure they try with your looks.”

Lucy blushed at that.

“Eh, I often find myself attracting the wrong sort.” She held herself and shrugged there. Diane bounced her daughter and beamed there, tried to stay in good spirits. “I must be giving off the wrong pheromones.”

1982

“Jim....Jim...?” She feigned a dreamy tone. “We’re not in Hawkins anymore.”

“Lucy.” He actually grabbed her hand, a motion that felt all too natural. Pulled her to a booth.

“This is all camp.” Lacquer red checkered tables. Bulky wood booths.

Wall to wall western cowboy tchotchkes.

“And it’s the best slab of ribs you’re going to eat.” He smacked a plastic menu down at her.

True to the theme, the waitress and waiter outfits were stylized all

cowboy. Cow print and brown suede. Tassels.

“Something to drink?”

Jim ordered a beer and Lucy’s rum and diet.

“Are we outlaws now?”

"What, are you turning *yellow* on me? Scaredy cat." He teased.

"Nobody calls me yellow." She shot back. "It looks like John Wayne himself might be taking our order." Lucy was giggling, plucking up the menu. "I suppose if I get the sauce on the side..."

“You’re actually trusting me?” He pulled an ashtray over to light up.

“I’m hungry.” She shrugged. “Jesus, Jim the whole menu is ribs.”

“And the rule is no cutlery.” Jim winked, earning a gasp.

“That’s why you brought me all this way, to make me get messy.” She gaped at him.

“It’ll feel amazing.” He sat back to blow smoke aside. Watched Lucy pout and turn her eyes to a horseshoe next to her. Wondered if maybe this was a bad idea. Lucy dressed like she ate caviar for breakfast.

She looked up at the ceiling and paused. Cheap, twinkle lights strung every which way. Gave the place almost an ethereal glow. Her head tilted.

“It’s...actually kinda pretty.” She sat up. “Frankly, I figured you brought me all this way so no one we knew would see us.”

Jim swallowed.

“Half true. Does that-?”

“Bother me?” She picked up. “I’m actually not sure. Hawkins is a small town, it loves rumors. Maybe, it’s better if we...try to keep them

at bay. I mean, we both already—”

“Are used to the rumors? Yeah. I...”

“Jim, is this a date to you?” She forced out. He opened his mouth and the waiter snapped them both to attention.

Tension sprang.

“Ugh. I’ll have the full rack. Fries on the side.” Jim ordered.

“Half rack, please,” Lucy scanned. “Sauce on the side and corn.”

“I’ll get those going for you two.” The waiter took their menus off so they locked eyes again.

“Lucy, I don’t know. I don’t.” Jim leaned in so she followed. “I don’t know what we’re doing.”

He just knew he was happier because of it.

“I don’t either.” She admitted. They kept looking at each other and away as if the connection was too powerful to stand.

“But, I like it.” He said and she barely heard that. Peered at his expression again. That thoughtful Jim way of careful observation. “I think...”

“I think we’re making it too complicated, Jim.” Lucy blurted. “I like it too. I’m always going to be your...your friend.”

“It’s already too complicated, I mean, you put on jeans.” His joke broke them both to laugh. But, she caught his hands shaking. Practically felt his heart pick up. Smelt stress burn a little like campfire, it was a scent attached to anticipation. Soured a little with shame.

“We keep coming back to this, you know. This question of what we’re doing and we still...don’t have the answer.” Lucy bit her lip, sighed. “And we’re hiding away because we know how it looks.”

"Yeah, we do."

Lucy opened her heart.

"Jim, the fact of it is...I can think more clearly when you're not around." A shudder.

"I...Lucy." Jim, unable to stop himself, dug for a pill. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." She whispered, eyes lowering. "We're not going to stop asking what this is. We both like it. Maybe we just enjoy it."

"What if we want it to be more or less?" Jim swallowed dry.

"I suppose we have to admit it first," she glanced at her hands in her lap. Caught her tattoo under a gold band. "I don't want it to be less. I care about you. But, I..."

She hissed a little as if pained.

"You can't let it be more right now." Jim answered so she didn't have too.

Maybe that was a hero complex he had. A need to save people from what lurked out in the world and what dwelled inside them.

"Is that okay with you?"

"What you want is always going to be okay with me, Lucy." Jim's hand curled out toward her so she closed the distance. Felt like the least she could do.

"Sorry, I don't know why I'm getting emotional. We're supposed to be having fun. There's a statue of a chubby horse behind you, I can't take it seriously." Lucy held his hand and wiped one eye. Laughed at this place. Sniffing and shaking her head to rid the feeling. "Is it strange if I call you my best friend? I don't get close to people. I just don't. Not even in high school."

"I think I can handle that." He brightened some.

"So, friends. We're friends." She shook his hand to make it official. "People in Hawkins are always going to think whatever they want.

We're adults in theory."

Jim chuckled as he snuffed out his cigarette. Food arrived so Lucy inhaled, mouth watering.

"Dig in, let's see it." Jim pulled two bones apart. Juice and sauce spilling off. Lucy whined, hands clasping. She used two fingers, trying to pull meat from the bone. Caught Jim snickering at her.

A growl and challenge danced before she put a rib to her mouth and tore the meat from it. Chewing. Juice trickled down her chin and through thin knuckles.

"Happy?" She held the bone in one hand and covered her mouth with the other. Jim broke again because she still looked cute there. "Are you going to teach me to spit like a man next?"

"That's way too advanced for you." They laughed there. Lucy, with her fingers covered, peered up at the lights again. Smelt an orange grove over the salty scent of their dinner. Realized she was happy. Stole one of Jim's fries to be a pain.

"I'll get you back for this." A shrug followed before she licked her thumb, tore for another bite. "I will admit these are good."

"Damn good?"

"The best fucking ribs I ever had." She stole the salt for her corn and let teeth pull at her bottom lip. A beat drew out. "You know, we passed a drive-in on the way up. I haven't been to one of those in years."

"Yeah?" He stole a swig from his beer. "Looked like they were playing some oldies later."

"Want to catch a flick? Play teenager again?" She drew the night out and he didn't mind. "I'll buy the tickets." He pulled for another rib trying to be nonchalant.

"I'll get the drinks."

"It was a beautiful service." Diane settled her hand on Jim's back as he bounced Sara in his arms. Standing before the front desk with Beverly while Frank moved chairs around in the next room. "Sweetheart, I'll get her in the car while you finish up." A quick kiss before they went off. "Lucy, nice to meet you. Thanks for all the help today."

"Don't mention it." They shook hands so Lucy craned to smile at Sara. "And goodbye, pretty girl. Maybe I'll see you both under brighter circumstances."

"I'd like that, take care." Diane grinned. Unknowing that was further from the truth.

Lucy Garland never saw either of them again.

"Thanks, Bev, for everything." Jim sighed. They'd picked up his mother after the service. "I gotta get mom settled in."

"Of course, we're a ring away if you need anything more, Jim. Don't be a stranger to Hawkins."

"Yeah," he fixed his coat and went toward the door, spotted Lucy there as she plucked a broom up. They stared at each other so Jim settled his hat back on.

"You have a beautiful family, Jim." She stilled when he came to her.

"Take care of yourself out here. Got it." Jim pulled her into his body for an embrace. Arms lifted reluctantly to pat his back. Her tone thickened.

"I will." She swallowed, blinking and came out. Cracked a twitchy smile. "Watch over that little girl, she's lucky to have you."

"I'm the lucky one."

Jim's blue eyes sparkled at her before he made his way out.

"Must be such a change," Beverly spoke idly, filling out the paperwork, "New York, I mean."

“Yeah,” Lucy swept the hardwood floors, “it was nice though. To see my friend again and know he’s going to be alright.”

** ** *

1982

Jim was handsy during the opening credits. Pulling Lucy into him for slow kisses, palms up her back. Cars pulled all around the lot before a screen under the cover of stars. Audio blared from a speaker on both sides.

“Some of us are here to watch a flick.” She pulled out to nestle into him, legs curling up on the seat. Wrapped in Jim’s coat because he’d settled it over her shoulders after leaving the cowboy restaurant. *An Affair to Remember*. One of Lucy’s favorite movies. Fitting and sappy.

“Thought we were playing teenagers.” Jim gave a stretch to get his arm around her shoulders. Another smooth move. Lucy glued her big eyes to the massive screen, sighing into his scent. Vaguely citrus with the cologne still.

“I’ve never been on a boat. Wonder what it’s like to rock there with the sea stretching all directions.”

“Dad’s old boat is still parked behind his cabin. Needs some work done before she’s seaworthy again.”

“You still have that old place?”

“Mostly for storage.” Jim’s fingers were drawing circles into Lucy’s shoulder. “I’ll get the boat fixed and take you out. Teach you the art of fishing.”

“Cocky words.” She chuckled there. “I bet I’d be a natural.” Eyes peeked up at him. Jim saw her there painted in technicolor and found himself.

“I want-”

Lucy silenced him with her lips. Clutched at his shirt to kiss the syllables away because she wasn’t ready to hear them. Settled back

into him to watch the movie. Jim silently agreed. Held Lucy to his chest and watched on.

Stayed in this little bubble to enjoy the starlight.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks so so so much!! Chat below with me or on my tumblr, Alias-B. I also take requests if the mood hits!! xoxo

13. Nearest Thing To Heaven

Notes for the Chapter:

Just wanted to say thank you to everyone who has supported me and this fic. Enjoy the chapter. TW: Forced ECT, death, assisted suicide, illness, vomiting.

Fall 1974

Lucy knew it had gotten too quiet.

Terry Ives tried to make noise and that was snuffed. Sued the lab and Brenner, but it was dismissed due to lack of evidence.

Certain details still leaked, became urban myths. Haunted the entire country. MKUltra was shut down. On the record. The lab managed to get out of hot water. Lucy didn't care to know how, the government's been screwing its own people over for decades.

Just looking at the treehouse made Lucy sick to her stomach. Welled a moldy fruit twang on her tongue. Those months were rough. Martin became short too easily and she didn't even get a phone call with Mia. Not like the ones she had were much to write home about.

The evidence her parents gathered was just circumstantial. Newspaper clippings a mad person would string together. But, Lucy was a living breathing nerve of truth. She started collecting too. Started telling ghost stories into recorders. Just to feel like she was doing something.

Hawkins Lab being so busy meant they mostly left her and Logan alone. Logan's men kept up work with certain hush jobs and Lucy was only ever called in to get rid of bodies on short notice. Ashes from the crematorium and dirt of the graveyard gently sprinkled over her being. Silk pulled along her body.

Martin told her to stay away and lay low. She didn't need to ask why.

Orange leaves begin to flutter from the great trees around her

house. Dressed and ready for the day's errands, Lucy poured herself a tiny cup of juice to sip as she felt light when a knock pulled her thoughts to focus.

Lucy smelt the burnt fury before she opened the door, but did it anyway. Almost walking into a tiny pistol pointed at her belly. Blue eyes shook at her.

"Terry." Pink lips gasped out.

"I need to talk to you. Now." Terry had already pushed her way in and Lucy wasn't going to argue with an upset mother holding a gun.

"How did you find me here?" Lucy backed into the wall and let the other woman lock the door. Terry dressed casually. Slacks and a nice beige coat. Purse under her arm. She had errands too. "Put the gun down."

"Wasn't hard, they kept you close. I don't want to hurt you." She held the pistol with two nervous hands. Must have practiced this in the mirror. Eyes steady. "I just want to talk. Please."

"In that case. Drink?" Lucy went around her. Tired as can be.

"It's eight in the morning." Terry watched the woman drag. "Do you drink to forget?"

"The past few years, perhaps. Never works, but I'll keep chasing pavements until I collapse." Lucy uncorked a bottle of white wine. Terry stood there like she didn't approve, only three years younger. Crossing, she snatched the bottle and dumped it into the sink. Lucy gave a sigh of aggravation, hands pressing the counter. "Damn it! That was my last one."

"I need you sober right now."

"Can you at least point the gun down?" She snatched up her orange juice again. Sipped. Terry wasn't faltering. Another lengthy huff. "Mind if I sit?"

"You're a diabetic." Bright eyes drew to the empty vials of insulin on the counter.

"It's been a year for my health." Lucy hissed a little, legs crossing. Sunk into the cushions. "Fucking fatigue. Couple long nights. Dose adjustments are killer. They need me tired right now, it's a great rest and then they'll wake me up to feed for them."

"Sorry." Terry lowered the gun. Went to the opposite chair. "You don't seem surprised that I'm here."

"You remind me of my mother. And Mia. Lot braver than I was." Lucy stared at the wall behind Terry. "It was only a matter of time."

"You're close with Brenner, you know things." Terry sat forward, gripping her purse. "Jane. You know about Jane. You know she's alive and in that...that place. The experiment isn't over. Is it? Talk!"

"Did you sleep with Martin?" Lucy's head shifted back like she hadn't even been listening. A part of her was far up and away.

"He isn't the father, if that's what you mean. It was once, I was grieving the loss of Jane's daddy. I didn't even know I was pregnant yet. Dr. Brenner was...there for me."

"He does that." Lucy blinked several times. "I haven't given him up, I keep crawling back. Keep letting him inside me." She sniffled, let one tear fall. "I'm special to him. He would have given me a baby to carry if I could carry one. I made it so I couldn't even try. And that's why he must have been elated for you. All those shimmery, functioning parts."

Lucy sighed.

"So, what can you do, Terry? Hm? What makes you special?"

"Nothing."

"That's not true." Lucy set her arms upon the rest. "Whatever potential he saw in you is why he took her."

"You saw her. Jane."

"He made me hold her." Lucy bowed her head down. "Fuck." Terry shuddered there, years of knowing and wishing. Having it confirmed.

"I'm so sorry. I'm... Mia and I. We tried to help her. Mia watches her on the inside, but I got shut out. We had to make it look like we both put the lab first. Wouldn't blame you for shooting me. I don't even know where they keep her. I haven't seen her once since the birth."

"I need to get back inside there." Terry persisted. "You can help me."

"Terry, they keep me on a tight leash. I can't save anyone. Don't you see that?"

"You will. I'll make you." The gun came up again. "It won't be your fault. Grab your purse and keys. Now!" Terry was on her feet.

Lucy finished her juice. Pushed herself up with another hiss. Staggered to the counter for her a key ring.

"What can you do?" Terry had asked when Lucy's back was turned.

"I press buttons on people and they do things. Somewhat predictable things. Same way a queen bee uses pheromones to influence the hive. I like to think I collect scent. Perfumes for a little collection. All bottled and organized for a witch's brew. Emotions are finicky."

"Dr. Brenner must think highly of you."

"He has me almost convinced he does." Lucy turned. "I'm just a freak in his sideshow. A siren they pulled from the sea. The main attraction. You provided my replacement."

Terry sparked and a shot fired, clanged metal to rip into it. Lucy ducked down under the counter. Caught Terry's wild eyes.

"You'll excuse me, I'm very forward and misbehaved this decade." Lucy gripped the marble and shuffled back up. Hands out. Eyes turned to the old radiator, a bullet clipped the side and left a jagged edge at the top. A stark point like something Sleeping Beauty would prick her finger on. "I've grown up complete unstable."

"You seem at peace with it."

"I am." Lucy stood taller. "I can't help you, Terry. This isn't how you'll get Jane back."

"I won't ever stop." Tears welled. "Don't try anything. We're going to your car and you're driving me into that place." She had a fierce expression, teeth bared like a mother wolf.

"If I drive you into Hawkins Lab," Lucy let her own tears fall and found it harder to speak, "you won't ever leave."

"I've been trapped in there since they stole Jane, it won't make any difference. I will find her. I couldn't save the others. But, I can save her." The gun shook. "I have to try and you're the only person who can help me."

"I wouldn't bet on me."

"I talked to Mia a lot, you know, she loves you and she believed in this. What would Mia do if she was here and you were in there? We can save them and run. Like Alice. Alice and Kali got out. Others got out too, it's possible. There are people who will help us."

Lucy's eyes lifted. Full of dreams.

"Mia would already be in the car driving you now."

** ** *

1982

Jim heard the sniffles over a swell of music. Peered down at Lucy clutching her chest with huge, shining eyes. The end of the movie played on. Lovers reunited.

"Oh, it's nobody's fault but my own! I was looking up... it was the nearest thing to heaven! You were there..."

Lucy wiped her eyes and Jim pulled her a little closer. Let the credits roll.

"Are...Are you crying?"

“No,” she wept a little to herself, “you know, my mother always cried at these movies and, for the life of me, I never understood it. I’m all grown up.” A chuckle followed so she blinked up at Jim. Roses bloomed in her cheeks under clumped lashes. He thumbed tears aside. “You want to drive somewhere quieter? And...park, as the kids would say.”

“Park?” He’d repeated slower. Lucy dropped her face into his shirt, snickering with a nod.

“Yes.” Lips pressed up. Fingers curled into fabric. “Park.” Jim started the engine with some vigor, peeling out around moving cars.

Lucy wrapped an arm around his and rolled her window down to breathe into the fresh night air. Looked up at his profile against the dark sky. Wind shifted their hair. Jim had this subtle smile dancing on his lips. An edge of excitement in his bones like he was out past curfew. They turned down a trail into the woods, venturing out beyond empty campsites where they could be alone with the stars.

“Gotta turn the car off,” Jim’s mumble hitched because she was already in his neck. Inhaling and opening his shirt.

“You’ve forgotten how to park, Hopper?” She heard the engine cut. Jim looked out at city lights in the distance beyond water. Admired the twinkling stars as Lucy’s mouth trailed over his skin. Sensitivity sparked. Thin fingers were under his shirt so Jim turned into her some. They maneuvered awkwardly around the seats and console. “Backseat looks like it has more room.”

“My thought exactly.” Jim kept trying to push up and kiss her.

A honk made them both jump before Lucy was giggling. Pulling at him before she wiggled to get in back and push the seat down. With the space wide open, Jim was crawling to hover over her.

Moonlight spilled over Lucy’s expression, making the gold painted on her eyelids glimmer. Jim marveled, one hand cupping her face while a thoughtful look crossed. A searching one.

The nearest thing to heaven.

“What?” Lucy uttered, kissing his palm and wrist. Caught the blue band he always wore there. Sighed. Her tongue swept the pad of his thumb so he traced her lips. Just looking at her. Smelling sweet and divine. Like a Christmas carnival of bright lights and cinnamon treats.

“Nothing.” Again, they both felt the words lifting so kisses drowned them out. Lucy eased his shirt off, tossing it into the front seat. More fabric followed into one unfolded pile. Hands palmed her thighs to push them apart, fingers cupped and Lucy moaned. Let Jim kiss her breasts as he rubbed with deft digits. Arousal slicking.

Everything about Jim was warm. Passion fogged the windows over. Lucy turned them around, tugging his jeans off. Jim’s mouth pushed into her neck, groan muffling because she was working him up to the brim. Bodies rolling forth then back. Lucy was kissed dizzy and whined when she felt him inside her. Body pressed flush. One palm spread next to her head. Eyes lifted to see stars beyond the fogging windows blurring together. Jim’s kisses were drunken, barely there. Stubble swatched.

He pressed all the way in and stilled. Rubbed her clit to elicit a moan that open her lips. Then he began to move. Hard pumps that had her forgetting her own name so she just sighed his.

Arms slid around Jim's shoulders. Held him tight like she might float away. Cries rose higher. Lucy felt his hands all around her. Scratched his back and arched with an orgasm he decidedly tore from her.

Lucy relaxed there under him. Helped Jim find his own release and kissed him through it. Wondered if maybe she was just another vice. Another addiction Hopper kept in his front pocket between his pill bottle and heart. The synapses stilled when he uttered her name soft like a small prayer. Melted into her body once he'd finished.

Clothing had to be sorted. A silence hung in the air because the only words that bubbled up dry throats damned them both. Jim held Lucy’s hand the ride home. Felt her head on his shoulder.

Darkness loomed down Cabrini Avenue, lamps dotting. She was at

total peace until they pulled in front of her house.

“Didn’t know you had company.” Jim turned the radio down. Lucy perked and felt her entire body grow cold at the black car in her driveway. Hopper turned to see her straighten and press her palms into the dash as if muscle memory kicked in. Couldn’t see how flushed she’d gotten in the dim light.

“Ah...I... Oh, right.” Lucy glanced at his eyes. Forced a nervous chuckle and looked at the hedges beyond him. “I’d forgotten. An old friend of my dad’s was supposed to visit me. They must have gotten in early. I hope they didn’t wait long. Sorry, Jim.” Lucy was scrambling to get out. Tangled in her seatbelt.

“You alright?” Jim clicked the belt off her. Noted the way she grew frantic and got out instinctively.

“I’ll see you-”

“Lucy.” Jim crossed around the car with long strides. Got in front of her.

“I had a really nice time.” She blinked several times. Grew very still, but hands betrayed her by shaking. One side step to get around him, leaving Jim confused there. Fingers wrapped around Lucy’s wrist. She felt her tattoo scorch white hot. “I’m sorry to run, I shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

“I want to be more.” Jim rushed the words. Lucy hitched a shudder. Processed. Searched his eyes and stood in front of him, still in his grasp. Inches away. A breeze picked up and neither shivered.

“I...” Lucy swallowed with big, glassy eyes. “I can’t.”

“I know.” Jim looked wounded even still. He was in no place to be more, but he wanted it so bad. Hoped that was enough.

“Jim, your friendship means so much to me.” Her shoulders lifted when he stared at her hand instead of her face. “It-”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“No, I want to. It’s not you, it’s me. It’s me.” Lucy pressed into him. Tried to find his eyes, but he refused her. “It’s not you.”

“I find that hard to believe.” He hitched like he might laugh. Didn’t. Lucy took his face. Held it.

“It’s the truth,” she insisted softer. “I care about you too much. When we’re together, I feel... I feel...” Lots of things. Safe. Luminous. Happy. “Held.”

Jim swallowed, only gave this solemn nod.

“But, we do this to numb. Don’t we? I don’t want this friendship to be something that just numbs us from the world outside. We can’t live in that. I can’t...do that to you.” There were too many parts of her life she couldn’t share. Parts that bled and burned.

“So, it is me.” His pills and drinking and fucking. His disregard for life these days.

“No! It’s not.” Lucy rubbed her head, struggling to find some truth in the web of lies. There was so much she couldn’t tell him. The syllables set fire to her lungs. So, she had to push him back at arm’s length. Gather herself. “We wanted to feel good. I was lonely. Maybe that was wrong. I care about you, but I was...just lonely. It’s not you. You believe me, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Jim lifted those blue eyes to her face at last, “no one ever lies about being lonely.”

“I’m sorry.” A tear rolled down. Jim swiped it on his thumb. “I just can’t be what you want.”

“I want you to be Lucy.” Jim shook his head, leaned in with his hand still on her jaw. “That’s all I’m ever going to want out of you.”

She sniffled.

“I guess I’m not sure if I can even be that for myself.”

“I know.” Jim traced a cool line into her cheekbone. Ached. “I was okay being around while you figured it out.”

"We can't. I can't do that to you. I won't. It's not fair. And I'm too sick. You shouldn't be with someone who will just hold you back later." Lucy curled her fingers into his. Pulled his touch away and stepped back. "I can't be more."

"Lucy, it's okay. I don't care that you're sick, I don't mind helping you down the line. I don't, I want to. You're not asking me, I want to. Can't you see that?" Jim backtracked. "I told you I'd be fine with-"

"But, you're not fine and I'm not fine. None of this is fine, Jim. I'm-" Lucy touched her lips. Cut it all off. "I can't. I'm sorry." She hurried up to the door, blocked out his protests. Unlocked it and smacked it shut with her body.

Saw Brenner there on the couch. Calm and flicking through a magazine. Hint of a smirk and not even seeming to look at her. He heard it all.

"Lucy, please. I lied. I don't want to be more. I'm sorry. I got caught up in things." Jim knocked. Pressed his head there. She always ran, he knew she would and still he hoped she wouldn't. "I don't want to be more, you hear me!"

"Go home, Jim." Lucy shot back tearfully. She shut the porch light off and listened for the sound of his car. Brenner set the magazine aside. Scanned.

"What are you wearing?" He stood, looked almost disgusted. "This isn't you."

She wanted it to be.

"Why are you here, Martin?" Lucy crossed her arms. Stayed at the door with her gaze elsewhere. Not wanting him to see her licking her own wounds.

"Go change into something proper. Wash up. I can wait." Brenner gestured to the stairs. Little colder than he meant. Not wanting to smell Jim on Lucy's skin. She shuffled up and washed it all down the drain. This night she'd had where the stars twinkled too kindly.

"What was that noise?"

"It's nothing. I took care of it."

"I should hope so." He stared.

"Martin, what's going on?" Lucy was buttoning a dress up to her neck. Noted he hadn't poured himself a drink.

"Come here and sit with me." One hand gave the cushion a friendly pat. She crossed. Hair damp around her expression. "It pains me to ask this of you after everything. We have a problem. A leak. And we found them, but we cannot close in."

"You promised me." Was all Lucy got out. Thick like she might be choking on her own blood. Like it was filling the space around her. Brenner set a careful hand upon her knee.

"I know what I said. Really, Lucy, asking this of you... I hate myself for it. But, it's what must be done. For the greater good." That hand lifted to her face and she swept up.

"You promised me!" Lucy cried at him. A petulant child.

"Lucy, put your hands on the table."

"You promised me!" She swept her arms out instead so Martin sprang to his feet. She screamed and even pushed his chest. "You promised me!"

"I said, hands. Now." A bark made her stop trying to bite. Lucy knelt there. Smacked her hands so hard, the glass gave a crawling crack. Didn't shatter. He came to her side. Held her close as she kept her palms flat and rueful. Perfect marble.

"You lied..."

"It hurts to ask this of you." Martin made a show of it to get choked up. Cupped her face. His glassy eyes even welled. "You're everything to me. And I know this might cause you some pain, but that's part of your growth. You are becoming, Lucy." His eyes flicked like he might even kiss her.

The unsettling way he said that frosted down her spine.

An eternal winter. The inside of a snow globe Brenner kept Lucy trapped in. One shake and a blizzard consumed her entire world.

“You understand how much it pains me to ask such a thing of you. I only want to protect you from this world. From yourself. And there are days I cannot.” Martin’s eyes flickered. “But, I can protect Mia. And you realize your part in that. This is for her too. For the greater good of all of us.”

“When?” Lucy cracked. Skin fizzling.

“Now.” Martin brought her to her feet. Swept a tear aside. “Tonight.”

** ** *

1974

“I’m here to see, Martin.” Lucy sounded devoid of anything. Looked up with dark circled eyes. “It’s important.”

They let her into the gate because it was always important. She was one of them. That felt stark in this moment. With Terry Ives hidden under a blanket in her backseat.

Lucy parked around back and felt the sob she held back the entire ride quell.

“There’s some visitors going in. That group of ladies. I’ll sneak in with...” Terry stopped fiddling with her gun and peered to see the woman in front of her.

“Terry, you’re not going to leave this place once you go in.” Lucy seemed not there. “And I brought you here. Oh, god.”

“Hawkins Lab did this to us, I don’t blame you. I held a gun at you. I made you. This isn’t your fault.”

“And I could have turned you around. I could have made you stop and I didn’t.”

Lucy burst into further tears. Covered her face to curl away from

the mother when a hand touched her spine.

“It’s all the same. The scent of emotions never change over time. They’re static. These people. I bet I smell just like the rest of them.” Lucy rambled in her daydreams. Looked out at the tangerine sky. Tried to pull her whimpering together.

“I know I might not get out. But, I’d never live with myself, you know. If I didn’t try for Jane. She has to know someone is fighting for her. If she knows that much...” Terry sniffed. Trailing off. “Thank you. I mean that.”

“Wait.” Lucy found her sleeve. “If Brenner spots you. It’s over.”

“Yes.” Terry hesitated.

“I mean, I’ll distract him.” Lucy’s fatigued eyes lifted. Terry narrowed on her, head shaking.

“They’ll just catch you too.”

“They already did, Terry.” She got out. “Give me a few minutes to stay ahead. I hope you find Jane.”

“If I don’t. Will you tell her about me?” Terry leaned over the front seat. Lucy paused to see her. “I realize you can’t say much, but just...anything.”

“Everything.” Lucy had promised. Heels clicking off as she wiped her eyes on her coat sleeve. Walked straight toward the headman’s axe.

“Zero, we didn’t expect you today.” Reception looked up.

“I have to see, Martin.” Lucy kept them calm with some fresh lavender and headed toward his office first. Luck was on her side just this once. A knock.

“Come in.” Brenner looked surprised to see her there. Stood without thinking, folding a file shut. “Lucy, what are you doing here?” She clicked the lock on him. Wondered how he felt being on that end.

"I needed to see you." Lucy still looked tearful. Let her coat slip to the floor in a heap. "You ever think about me and how much I need you?" She stepped toward him there. Tie loose as he mulled over files. Sleeves rolled up. Hair still going a pristine, regal white.

She was clearly not well. Like she might never be well again. Maybe that was true a long time ago.

Martin observed her. Let a hand twist into his tie until her lips were on his. She'd never come to him at work to fuck.

"I never stop thinking about you." He said. "That's what you do to people." Hands grasped her biceps. Held her upright and in place. Tried to keep her soul static. Lust burned. Cotton candy. "Lucy, you look flushed. This year has been so uneasy on you." Knuckles touched the back of her forehead. It was always so difficult to pick up Martin's scent. He disguised it well under layers of fear and *Colonia*.

"Do I taste like cherries?" She asked, kissing him deeper. "Pie."

A chuckle roused into his lips.

"Tasty, tasty," she swayed, "beautiful fear." Martin silenced Lucy with his mouth. Kissed her back into the sofa. "I love every scent, even the foul ones. Did you know that? They're just so human." Martin kissed along her neck. Lucy gripped to keep him atop her.

Eyes on the fake leaves of a shiny plant across the way. Artificial like Brenner himself. Like the emotions she pumped into souls the same way she had to plunge insulin into her body.

"Except hopelessness. And apathy. All the mold and rot. The stink of flesh maggots feed on. Something so evil about them. I bet if I dug poor Nolan up, he'd smell all the same, I didn't preserve him properly."

"What are you talking about?" Martin lifted to see her eyes. Child-like and sunken. Lips curled.

"Did you really think it wasn't me?" Lucy scoffed with her palm sinking to cup him. Fingers wrinkling his pressed shirt. "Your sweet siren. He touched me so I drowned him. I'm capable of evil, just like

you, Martin... Silly rabbit, tricks are for kids... I just love that commercial, don't you?"

He pushed off her to sit up but she came with.

"You have me believing plenty of untrue things as well. I thought I was the only one. Not the only experiment, but the only one you were screwing. You crawled on top of that woman and stole her baby." A crack.

"It was only once, I hardly see a reason to fuss." He shoved her off him. Stood with his breathing rapid. Lucy came up, splayed there.

"I'm not fussy." She puffed. "You crawled on me after I killed Nolan. I still felt the dirt under my fingernails and you fucked me so hard, I almost forgot what I did." A laugh. Harsh like a witch. "Are you mad at me?"

"No. Frankly, you did us a favor. I'd ask you not to do it again without permission." He replied plainly.

"I do you lots of favors." Lucy tugged at his belt. Brought Martin back into her arms. Came up on her knees to press her head into his chest. He just stood there. Let her arms wrap around his back.

"I mean it, you know, when I say you're everything. I won't ever marry, but if I could, it would be you, Lucy. Only you."

"Only me?" Lucy mused to herself. Eyes lifting. "Say it again."

"Say what?" Martin took her arms to see those eyes. Unmoved. A prized porcelain doll in a glass case he built for it.

"That I'm the only one." Lucy would make herself the center of Martin Brenner's world. Stay closer so the other experiments couldn't approach. And when she had his every tender nerve within her grasp...

She thought of things like strings being pulled to unravel fine silk.

Cracks fracturing out in glass.

More angels screaming and dying. Pulled into bloody waters to become sirens with a killing shrill to command the seven seas.

"You are my only one." A thumb swiped her tear aside. Lucy stared at him there with a peaceful expression.

"Say, I love you, Lucy."

Martin Brenner smiled like he might be dreaming too.

"I love you, Lucy."

An alarm erupted. Red and blaring. Lucy's little snow globe world shook then rained down.

Martin saw her eyes change. Pulled to see what was going on but she clung to him.

"It could be dangerous."

"Not if I have you, my dear. You'll protect me." An arm was behind her body. Holding her close to stumble out. Lucy burrowed into Martin's chest as they went down the hallway.

"What is going on?" Brenner signaled a security guard.

"It's under control, Doctor. Terry Ives. She broke in for the child. They subdued her downstairs."

Lucy felt Brenner's hand squeeze her left wrist. A shackle. Immediately, it was clear he knew.

"Go. Keep her contained, I'll be right down." Brenner was pleased until the man left. Hands shoved Lucy into the wall. Shook her around. "Lucy, don't tell me you brought that woman into this place. Do not tell me you'd ever do something so very stupid."

"She would have gotten in without me, she's awake." Lucy nodded with huge eyes. No longer struggling. Disconnected. "She wakes and the rest of us will follow, don't you see? We're all damned and this is hell."

"You've ruined so many lives and now you add to the list." Martin dragged her by the elbow. "I expected this from her, not you. I wanted to avoid this, but it was always inevitable." Lucy fumbled after him. Heard the screaming and saw Terry strapped to a gurney. Writhing and spitting. "Sit Lucy there, make her watch."

"Martin!" Lucy saw another doctor swarm with a needle as Terry squirmed. "No! No, don't kill her! Please!" Agents held her back as Brenner shrugged on a lab coat. "Don't kill her! Let her live. She can learn, like I did!"

"Stop." Martin waved the first doctor away. Peered at Lucy and brightened. "Lucy, you're in no place to believe you're doing this woman a kindness."

"Please, don't kill her." Lucy struggled, craning to get closer to him. "Do it for me. And the little girl."

"Do you even know what life is worth?"

"More than you." Came the pleading hiss. Her heels skidded. "Just let her live."

"Fine." Brenner leaned over Terry. Gestured for his doctor to bring a machine closer. "At Lucy's request. She can live. Now, say: thank you, Martin."

"Thank you, Martin." Lucy sounded like she meant it.

"Say, I love you, Martin." He licked his lips and she tremored.

"I love you, Martin." Came her shattering reply. "So much. I love you. Please."

Terry was looking at Lucy, face puffed from crying.

"Protect my baby, please. Please, no." A wail was cut by rubber forced into her teeth.

"You believe yourself, Lucy. I do too." Brenner turned. "Four-fifty."

"Martin, no!" Lucy screamed when Terry Ives couldn't. "Don't do

this!” She wiggled from the agents and smashed into Brenner’s chest.

“Watch. I want you to watch it happen and know what life and love are worth.” Martin forced her wrists to cross and held them in front of her. Lucy kicked up with no avail. Pressed flush into his chest and felt him kiss her temple. The lights flashed and Terry arched as her brains were fried. Sagged. “Again!”

Lucy couldn’t hear herself scream any longer. Cheeks wet and lips open in horror. Eyes wide like saucers. Face trapped in marble, stuck in a moment of terror and mania.

“Again.” Martin kept commanding until Terry was only twitching. Hands limp over the side of the mat in their straps. Lucy felt her expression fall. Lips hanging slack as her eyes dulled. She didn’t even move when Brenner let go to see to Terry, tutting. Brown eyes lifted to one of the doctors beyond him in the corner writing and something snapped.

Blood fell from her nose over open lips. A beat. Vomit erupted violently from his mask. The clipboard dropped. Many stepped away, Brenner peered at Lucy’s lifeless eyes. Glassy intent on the doctor beginning to convulse. His head smacked the ground hard enough to spatter blood.

“Step away from him!” Brenner had commanded. But, he went still. The veins around his eyes and neck darkened with poison. Lucy’s own eyes rolled back. Blood all down her mouth and chest. Martin caught her with one arm.

“Sir, he’s dead.”

“I know.” Martin sighed, gaze on Lucy before he cradled her head. “Get rid of him. Transport Ms. Ives to the hospital so her sister can pick her up. You know what to do. We need assistance for Lucy, prep a room now.” Heroic as can be, he swept her up into his arms.

Carried Lucy off.

** **

She heard the beeping first. Steady and then quick. Eyes cracked to

a flood of white.

“Lucy, dear, can you hear me?”

“Mom?” She’d croaked, blurring the figure together. Time slowed. “Beverly?”

“Frank, get a nurse in here.” Beverly smiled as quick footsteps retreated. “Yes, it’s me, hon. You’re okay. Just rest.” Lucy wiggled, attached to so many wires and needles. “You went into hypoglycemia and collapsed four days ago.”

“Four days?” Lucy about sprang. Beverly pressed her shoulder back into the pillows.

“You’re okay. You’re alright.” She soothed. Brown eyes lifted to so many flower bouquets. Peonies from the Crawfords. Red roses from Benny. Unmarked painfully yellow daffodils. Martin. A nurse swept in to prattle and prod. Lucy didn’t hear a word of what she said because she knew the room would clear and Brenner would come.

Frank and Beverly peppered her cheeks and temples with kisses. It didn’t take long for Brenner to materialize the second her doctors left.

“Well?” Lucy lifted her eyes to the ceiling to count endless dots. “What really happened?”

“You did go into hypoglycemia. The first day. We kept you under to get some answers.” He came to her bedside and sat down. “They’ll keep you one more night for observation and then you’ll be healthy enough to go home. You have my word.”

“Terry.”

“Poor woman. Getting needed rest.”

Lucy turned her face further from him out of spite.

“What was it you smelt before you passed out?” Brenner asked then.

“I don’t remember much beyond the start of Terry’s torture. You...” Lucy closed her eyes. Opened them. “Just death. A sweet and chemical smell I could taste right after.”

“Dr. Edward Spool. Age, forty-eight. No wife or kids. But a younger brother with four little ones missing their uncle. Worked with us for about sixteen years. Dead in a matter of seconds.”

“And.” Lucy wet her lips, stared at the fragrant flowers again.

“And he was in perfect health. Even had a rather clean family history. But, when they observed him. It looked like he’d been a diabetic for all his life. Blood sugar shot up to near a thousand. Marvelous. You didn’t influence his emotions, Lucy, you poisoned him. And your sugar lowered dangerously. I won’t ask you to demonstrate again at the risk of your health. But, this development...it’s incredible.”

Martin touched her chin, made her look back.

“They all joked about this toxin you wielded. I just want you to know I won’t soon forget what you can do.”

“You’re not going to make me kill again?”

“No, I promised you,” Brenner pressed a kiss into the apple of her cheek, “did I not? We’ll get you home and I’ll take care of you like I always do.”

“I’d rather do it myself, Martin.” Lucy met his eyes. Summoned the courage. “I want to stop.”

“Stop?”

“Us. It’s a distraction. I don’t want to do it anymore.” Her arms on a bed. His clothing folded on her dresser. No more.

“You’re always free to stop, dear. I love you no less.” He tried to make her believe she was in control. Martin liked to believe she was bluffing. “Do you still love me, Lucy?”

Her voice cinched. Eyes welled before she just nodded. Unable to

give much else.

That season and the ones to follow. Lucy held tight. Never let him touch her again.

Never folded his clothing for him.

That much was her victory.

** ** *

1982

Wind whistled and wept. Lucy, in her best dress and coat, wandered some jazz bar. Smoke and sweat filled the air with music. Some saxophone picked up. Blared. A helmet of blonde hair whirled the second she approached the bar. Green eyes huge and fearful.

The woman barely met Lucy's gaze. Snatched her tiny purse up and headed out into the wet streets. Heels clicking. She was an utter bombshell. Lucy's age. Hiding out in loud clubs to escape the world. In her picture, she'd been lanky and thin with mousy hair. Transformation touched them all.

Lucy pursued. Unworried.

She already had the woman stumbling. Trying to hurry up. Looking back as if an angel of death was hot on her tail. Maybe that much was true. A fur coat was hanging from her thin shoulders. Displaying a diamond necklace and pink dress tight to her body. Hiding under opulence too.

Lucy sniffled blood. Felt her body unfurl.

"Stop." The bombshell that smelled of hot pie turned to Lucy, gasping. Green with nausea. Lucy did. Paused on the sidewalk of an empty street.

She stared as if Lucy was a great monster from every nightmare in this life. Maybe that was true now too. Something with painted red lips and glowing eyes that made you feel hopeless when you looked into them.

"I've seen you. I've seen you in his head. No, you can't..." The woman rambled, reeling over to puke into the sewer drain. "No..." She fought through it.

Lucy let a spray of blood wash. Stared and didn't stop. Metallic and seeping. Didn't move either. Tried not to think.

"Whoa, lady, you okay?" A civilian left a nearby club. She stared at Lucy, stumbling up only to drop her shoulders. Gave in because she had no choice. That same lifeless expression. And then she made for the road. Body cracking into the front of an oncoming bus. Tires skidded. People rushed from bars to see.

Lucy thought to run, but was caught. Caught in the woman's words. So, she approached, pulling her coat closer.

No one noticed her trying to see. A streetlamp flashed over the woman to illuminate her. Still pretty in death like she was posed for a camera. Sprawled and broken across cement. Eyes wide at nothing.

A tattoo on her wrist. 002.

Lucy shuddered. Eyes closing before she was stumbling away. Bodies passed her in the mess of it. More cars screeching to stop. Hands yanked a door open and slammed it.

"It's done." She didn't look at Logan. "Fuck. Fuck!"

He started the car to slip out of the alleyway.

"Did you know the girl was one of us. One of me? A number."

"What?" He saw Lucy shaking with a fury there. "No."

This was a slow pause before Logan whispered.

"Which one?"

"Two."

He shook his head, turned those blue eyes elsewhere. Lucy smelt this rot like he'd failed the girl too.

"I didn't know either, Lucy."

"They didn't tell me that. I'm offing their failures now too." Lucy rolled the window open to smell the air and only got blood. Filling her nose and mouth. "Fuck! Fucking, god damn it!" A wail tore. Logan let her kick and writhe around. Gave her a space to grieve and offered a candy bar when it was done.

"Sugar's low because of... Just eat something. You'll feel better. Long drive home."

"If I asked you to stop at a motel. Would you fuck me?" She turned to see him almost choke. The car jerked.

"What!" Bright eyes widened at her. "Lucy, don't do this to yourself."

"You want me, I always knew you did." She teared up at him.

"I did, Lucy, but...I won't. I won't be something you hurt yourself with. You want out and you want Hopper. So, go and don't look back at Brenner. Don't even look at me. Don't crawl to him like he wants you to." Logan took her wrist. Felt her head on his shoulder. Both hands gripping his arm.

"I'm so scared."

"Yeah, I am too. But, I'm going to get you out of this. I can't do that if you keep hurting yourself. You have to fight too. Hey."

Eyes lifted.

"Lucy, I've...there are things you don't know. Things I can't tell you to keep you safe. You need to trust me." Logan reached for her hand again. Found it so she clung to him further.

"You know who she is, don't you?"

"That woman's name was Sidney Connor and she was caught the same way you were. Mia and I have been helping subjects get out. Number or not. They had people trapped underground. When the experiment went tits up, many got out and some were kept under

false pretenses. Your sister is helping them. She's doing her best. Said Eleven is the only one left alive."

"Jane." Lucy kissed his knuckles. Crumbled with tears.

"We're being watched closely. I just wanted you to know Mia's fighting and she needs you to fight again too. Alright? Because once they're out, she can't help them. But, you can. Jane needs you, she doesn't have anyone. Her mother, you saw what they did to her. You think she can get out and live a normal life? The lab, it all has to go."

"Brenner's too powerful." Lucy wept so he pulled over to the side of the forested road.

"There's only one of him!" He grasped for her other wrist. "Only one. Everyone else is about the money. It's smoke and mirrors. You're the first one, Lucy, and the things you can do send men like Brenner pissing. There are more survivors than there are men like Brenner. Don't you realize that?"

He took her face. Intent in darkness.

"I need you to fight. We won't always be there, but that doesn't matter." Logan shook her some. "Just promise me that. You have everything you need to do this. You're worth a thousand of him. It's enough. You're enough and I love you. Hear me? I always have. I didn't help you in that place and...every day I regret it."

He teared up at her. Begged forgiveness.

"I'm gonna make it right, Lucy. Okay? I promise. Trust me and I can't let you look back. I did things that are catching up with us."

"Logan." She let him kiss her softly. "I love you too, I never blamed you. I need you."

"No, you don't and that's a beautiful thing. Promise me."

So many things billowed off Logan at once. The lemon pine of confidence. Old books smelling of pure hope. And that illusive curl of cinnamon. Something she wasn't ready to face.

“Okay...” Lucy swallowed a lump. Nodded to assert it. Grasping at Logan’s shoulders to bring him close. Knowing she wouldn’t always have him here. She just smiled for him because he needed her to. “Okay. I’ll try. I’ll fight. I won’t stop. I’ll wake up. I have to wake up.”

Lucy kept wheezing that. Granted him another sweet kiss. The last one Logan Myer's might share with anyone.

“I’ll just wake up soon. I won’t stop. I promise.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you guys so much, again I love this fic a lot and I'm still excited to be posting it. :) Chat with me below or on my tumblr, Alias-B.

14. Paper Boats And Lovelace

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello everyone!! The timelines finally connect. Jim comes home to Hawkins in 1979. A hard consequence in 1982 changes Lucy. TW: Murder, vomiting, mentions of suicide.

1979

Rain poured. Huge, glopping drops that splattered out. Lucy took a walk in it. Decided it was the perfect afternoon to get caught under a storm. Humming soft and sweet. Gone. Floating farther away from this reality.

A sleek rain coat, candied red, fitted taught along her frame. Shiny like plastic and so artificial. Heels clicked wet pavement under dark grey skies. A white umbrella with polka dots the same shade of red. She drenched the dull world in vibrant, bouncing colors. Blood in the streets.

Lucy imagined it flowing out from her. All directions. The hands of her experimental siblings dead and alive clawing out from sewer drains.

She continued to hum alone. Pretty siren. Murderess.

A child's helpless cry brought her down to Earth. Set her teeth on edge.

“No, wait! No!” Small rubber steps squeaking behind her. Lucy spun to see a little boy in a yellow raincoat that was too big on him. Racing down the side of the street to follow the water draining toward the sewer. Chasing a paper boat.

Lucy hurried to pluck it up before it could be washed away with nothing at the same time the boy skidded to fall into pavement. Her umbrella came down, quick steps to grasp his fragile, pale wrist and bring him up. The rain ruined her hair instantly. Splashed down her

face to make the mascara bleed down by crimson lips.

“Are you alright, sweetheart?” She swept the mud from his clothes as he sniffled and tried to be braver through the pain. Ink black hair and snow white skin. A red tint across his puffed cheeks from the chase. Looked like a doll. Rain covered his little tears. He had to be about eight.

“I can’t talk to strangers.”

“You’re very smart not to do so.” Lucy stood and took a step back for good measure. Too still and eerie there. Plucked her umbrella up to close it. Head tilting without a blink. “What a lovely boat.” She held it toward him. Scribbled on the side was *S.S. Wheeler*. “Would you like it back?”

A calm took her over with the rainfall. The little boy smelled vaguely of a bakery. Strawberry rhubarb pie. Frightened of a stranger with a red smile in the storm.

Lucy wondered if fear was a beautiful thing. It made us truly human. Reminded us that we were here and moral. Motivated us to be brave and push.

He nodded slower, eyes catching the light.

“You’re Karen’s son, aren’t you? Mike.” Lucy bent to offer the boat. “Be careful out here, you don’t know what lurks underneath us.”

“Nothing ever happens in Hawkins, lady.”

“Maybe when we’re not looking. Sometimes it’s easier not to see.” She let him take the craft back. “Just keep those eyes open.”

“Thank you.” He sniffled and wiped his cheek.

“Mike!” A young teen raced around the tall hedges. Stilling without a coat on like she’d rushed out of the house. “You were supposed to wait for me! Mom’s going to be upset...oh, sorry about my brother, Ms. Garland.”

“Nancy. It’s fine. He’s alright. Tough kid.” Lucy felt droplets

seeping down her locks and into her jacket. Warm, humid rain with no chill in sight.

“Miss Garland, the witch?” Mike had whispered to his sister.

“Be quiet!” Nancy hissed. “Sorry.”

“No, I get that a lot. It’s an old house and I live alone in. And I don’t leave it often.” Lucy knelt to Mike. “Promise to be a good witch only. But, you can’t tell anyone.” A finger touched her lips and Mike gave a toothy grin. Mimicking the motion. “Tell Karen I said hello, Nancy. You look so much like her, more and more every day.”

Nancy took her brother’s hand.

“Thanks and thanks for helping him.” She pressed her lips. “C’mon, Mike. My jeans are ruined.”

“Bye, lady!” Mike waved his boat and hurried to keep up with his sister. Lucy tucked the umbrella under her arm and made her path home to change into another dress. Caught a red light blinking on her answering machine. Pressed the button as she clipped her stockings into place.

“Lucy, it’s Beverly. You won’t believe who I saw in town. Hopper. Jim Hopper. Your Jim. I know he was your friend.”

Lucy dropped her boot, back snapping. *Her Jim.*

“He didn’t look the same. Why would he after... I just thought you should know if you haven’t heard from him. He looked bad. Maybe you can check on him. Said he was staying at the Motel Six.”

Lucy was already out the door. Car revving to squeal off. It’d been over a year since she spoke to Jim. Months of sending letters and leaving voicemails. Trying to reach him and say how sorry she was and that she was here.

Little Sara passed away. Word was Diane left him not long after.

The neon sign blared in the muted distance as she pulled up in search of him or his car. Anything. She ended up bribing the host five

bucks for the room number. Nineteen.

“Jim!” Knocks shook the door. Turned her knuckles red. “Jim Hopper!”

She almost smacked him mid pound when the door swung back. There he was. Thermal black shirt and jeans. Rumbled and scruffy. Hair a mess. Eyes sunken like he hadn't slept in years. Lungs swept for air. Hands crossed to press into her beating heart.

“Jim...I heard you were in town.”

“Lucy.” A smile crept over his glazed expression and he hugged her smelling of a bar's back alley.

And then the metal poured molten and bloody.

Jim buried his nose in Lucy's neck and pulled her into the room.

“Hi.” She stood still like marble.

“*Mm* so happy to see you. I got all ‘yur letters.” Jim wobbled with her tight in his arms, urging her to hug back so she did.

“J-Jim.” Lucy touched his arms. Figured she was barely keeping him upright. They swayed together, Lucy trying to catch his eyes. “How much have you had to drink?”

“I'm celebrating the new job. I'm back for good.” He staggered around. She saw rows of bottles lined up. Mostly empty.

“New job.”

“Hawkins Chief-o-Police, they practically begged me to take it.” He opened some scotch and spilled it all over the dresser trying to pour. The room was covered in clothing, trash, and towels. “Have a drink with me. To celebrate.”

“I really shouldn't.”

“Why are you here?” Jim turned, leaning against the TV stand, some black and white flick played behind him. “You look pretty.”

“I heard you’d come home and I wanted to see you. Jim, I’m so-”

“Why won’t you have a drink with me, Luce?” He pushed a glass of brown liquid into her hands. Clicked their cups and downed his in one go.

There was this haze all around him like a silent specter in wait. Lucy tasted blood and felt it fill her mouth. Her stomach. Drowned.

“Why’re ya crying?” Jim took her glass and drank it too. Wiped her cheek with a fumbling hand.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to.” She sniffled and hid her face. “I just missed you.”

“I’m staying in this shitpile ‘til I close on the new place.” Jim changed the subject. Leaning on Lucy’s shoulder with his big hand for support. “I’m right here, Lucy, don’t cry.”

“I tried to call.”

“I know.” He seemed sobered. The haze darkened around him. Festering. Blood bubbled and boiled over. It bled from the walls. Same way her mother sensed once. “I’m right here.”

Jim couldn’t see it. He couldn’t see this pain and danger consuming him. But, Lucy could so she stayed right there. Static.

“I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t do that. I don’t need to be fuckin’ worried about.” Jim’s terse voice changed. “I think you should go.” He turned to drink straight from the bottle. Every single drop. Lucy crushed her teeth in.

If she left this room, she would not see Jim Hopper again.

“I think I should stay.” Lucy lifted a shaken hand and touched his rigid back. Jim shoved a pill into his mouth. Sniffled hard. “I’m staying, Jim, we don’t have to talk.”

“You know what I think, Luce?” Jim swerved toward her and

stopped. A lump welled in his neck.

Lucy saw the expression change and shoved him toward the tiny bathroom. Jim barely made it to the toilet bowl before he was puking. Violent wretches that seized his entire body. Lucy crouched and held him in place, let him finish before he shoved her hard enough that she hit the floor. Shocked at him. Mouth open to gape. He pushed her. Pushed his friend away like he did with everyone.

And then Jim broke. Buried his face back into the bowl and sobbed. So hard that he puked some more. Lucy wet a towel to wipe his slack lips clean and Jim was gathering her back into his arms. Face stuck into the terry cloth between them.

“I’m sorry, Lucy.” He squeaked out, slurring. “Sorry. ‘M so sorry.”

“Jim, I’m gonna stay.” Was all she said which earned a nod. “C’mon, get undressed. Let’s get you cleaned up.” She pulled at his shirt. Helped him stand until he was clad in boxers. Ran the water warm and coaxed him to get under it. “Just wash up.” She went out and trashed every bottle she found. Disposed of them in a nearby dumpster as the rain began to clear. Jim emerged and put on some fresh clothing she left.

“They had some sandwiches at the gas station across the way. Eat something and go to bed.” Lucy waved the food in his face. “We don’t have to talk. Just eat and lie down. I’m going to take this second load of garbage out... You’re worse than a rock star, trashing hotel rooms.”

She plucked up a black bag and Jim stood there. Sobering.

“Lucy.” He waited until she turned. “I missed you too. I should have written back.”

“You’re here now.” Lucy acknowledged softer. “We’re together again. I have my friend back and I’m sorry.” Lucy remembered those bright eyes and that toothy smile. The little baby full of life with parents who loved her so much.

Blue eyes cast somewhere else. All he could do was nod stiffly.

Anything else would have shattered him.

Lucy returned barely three minutes later to Jim snoring atop the covers with a paper wrapper clutched in his hand. Easing it out, she managed to cover him and took the couch. Curled up and stayed there switching TV channels until sleep took her too.

Jim rolled out of bed a few hours later. Dinner time. Lucy was balled up under her own jacket. Stocking clad toes sticking out from under the hem. Head pounding, Jim went to wash his mouth out. Downed two capsules.

“Luce.” One finger drew some black strands aside. Lashes fluttered.

“Hmm, Jim?” Her eyes cracked. “Sorry, I dozed off. What time is it?”

“Just after six.” He stuffed a hand into his pocket. “Thanks for... staying around.”

“You were pretty out of it.” Lucy stretched out.

“I, uh, start Monday. At the station. Should be moved in by then. Some trailer near the other side of the quarry.” He exhaled. “I...”

“Yeah, I should...” Lucy reached for a pad and paper. “Let me give you my-”

“I still remember your number.” Jim stopped her. “I’ll give you mine when I’m settled into the new place.” Lucy came to her feet, using his arm to stay steady and put her heels on. Jim touched her elbow. Let Lucy settle into his chest. No one had held him in months. Since Diane left.

“Jim, you take care of yourself.” She murmured into his shirt, fingers bunching the fabric. “Please.”

Too much loss had touched them both. More would come.

Hopper only held Lucy a little tighter in response.

** ** *

Lucy knew she'd done the job well because they left her alone after the short debrief. A week of silence. Total and complete.

And it became maddening. So, she went to her friend one early morning. *Blue Velvet* sat in wait. A flutter of lights from the disco ball hit the dark windows. Gleeful and obscene. It set her nerves prickling on edge.

"Logan..." She hurried into the doors. He was always in first. Early to rise and prepare for the next day's intake of cash. "Logan!" She swept through velvet drapes. "You answer me this minute!" There were glittering chunks of confetti from the night before. Sweeping forth at her quick steps.

A creak. Up in the rafters.

Lucy closed her eyes. Never wanted to open them again.

She knew.

Logan had known too. He tried to prepare her.

Another lengthy creak like the swingset she and Mia used to play on when they were young and free.

Brown eyes lifted. The scream howled endless. A siren's blare. A warning to oncoming ships that she would come for fresh blood.

Logan Myers. Hanging limp and blue from a rope. Like his sister before him. The light played on his skin. Made him almost alive. Didn't revive enough. Lucy found herself pulling at his legs. Wanting to give him the dignity of lying him down to rest.

She just cried and wailed again. Swept everything off the bar. Glass shattered with her screams. Brenner did this. Logan must have blown his cover when the heat kicked up. For her and for Mia and for all those poor souls they saved or tried to.

All those goodbyes he gave her couldn't prepare Lucy for this. She howled at him. Distant echoes that bounced back and forth. He must have fought. Hard.

And he would be remembered for how he died. Being the last of his family. Lucy sucked every bit of fight back into her ribcage. Staggered out into the sunlight to a payphone. Covered her fingers with a cloth. Dialed.

"He's dead. Up at the *Blue Velvet*. Find him." She hung up and went to her car. Saw those pretty lights flare. Skidded to drive off. Another payphone far enough away.

"Dr. Brenner, speaking."

"Why?" Lucy cried into the receiver. "Why, him? You knew I loved him. He was the only person out here who knew all about me and he was mine. I was his too. You took my sole comfort in this hell and-!"

"Lucy. Our friend's side activities were too much to be ignored or forgiven. He's caused us a great deal of trouble and he was caught. There will always be consequences, you know this by now."

Beating hearts were all consequences to Martin Brenner. Rage flickered.

"You have me mopping up your strongest failures, Martin," Lucy spit through teeth, "but, I wonder...who will be left and able enough to take me down when my number's up too? I really wonder and I know you think of it too. I know it keeps you up at night."

"Lucy, I realize this is hard for you to accept. But, you will. You'll bury it somewhere nice. All that sorrow." He replied in his clinical way. "I'll take care of you. Why not come here today? We'll talk about this."

Talk. That's not what he meant.

Choke it down. Her voice calmed. She hadn't called his private line so this was being listened in on.

A laugh drew like the cackle of a mad clown. Or witch.

"And you still won't be able to bury your fucking sorrow in my pussy." Lucy hit the phone down so hard, it snapped. She broke the door too shoving out to get back into her car. Martin would steam on

that vulgarity for awhile.

Logan was dead. Terry was gone. Her parents were gone. Mia was trapped. Jane was trapped. All because one man wanted to feel like God.

Lucy would play his game. Until her siren song drew him under dark waters into her arms. Until she could sink sharp teeth into his neck. Suck him dry and tear flesh from clean bone.

She tried to go home. Drove up to the quarry instead.

Knocked on Jim's trailer because she wanted to be more.

Tears ruined her makeup. He answered with this alert look upon seeing her expression. They hadn't spoken since that dinner. Since she tried to cut him out.

"Jim." Lucy came into his arms. Felt him tense up and grasp her elbows.

"Lucy, what happened?"

"I'm sorry." She pushed out. Gripping his shoulders. "I didn't know where to go. My friend...My close friend. We loved each other. And he...he died this morning. Suddenly. I should have been there. I didn't get to say goodbye." Lucy was in his chest again, inhaling. Crying too soft. "I just needed to tell someone and, fuck, Jim. *Fuck*. You're the first person I think about when I wake up, did you know that?"

Jim gave this sobering unreadable expression. Smelled bloody, but it went sour with shame.

Lucy searched him. Lips opened to tell him something close to the truth while his eyes averted.

"Hopper, I'm using the shower." A giggle pulled from down the hallway. Attached to a pretty pair of legs in Jim's flannel. Lucy dropped away from him. Stepped backward.

"Oh, you're..." She'd clearly interrupted something from last night.

“Sorry.”

“Luce, wait a second.” Jim scrambled after her. “Your friend. *Jesus* . Wait, this isn’t-”

“No, Jim, it’s fine. We were never...” She pressed a tight smile at him. “I gotta go. I’m just emotional and...and stupid.”

“Lucy, wait.” He snatched her wrist and got shaken off. “Stop!” The unintentional shout had Lucy’s hands pressed flat against her car door. She blinked and shook her head. Shared at her wide-eyed reflection there.

Realized that there was no unconditioning herself into something real Jim Hopper could possibly love.

“Can we talk about this?” He asked gentler. “Meet me at lunch. Can we just talk about it? I’m sorry. I am. About all of it.”

“No, Jim, we can’t.” Lucy got into her car. Smacked the door shut on him. Ignored his hand on the glass.

She started the engine to drive as far away from Jim Hopper as she could.

Sawyer was the only one at Logan’s funeral when that time came.

He held Lucy’s hand. Confirmed what she knew about Logan and the things he hid from her out of love.

“You need anything, sugar, call this number. Me and the guys are hightailing it out. We were loyal to Logan.” Sawyer kissed her cheek. “I know you loved him. I did too. I just wish I...”

His big eyes watered so he put sunglasses on.

“He trusted you, Sawyer. Stay safe out there.” Lucy begged with one hand gripping his suit. “You should go. And thank you for everything.”

“Remember what I told you. That night.”

“I will. Promise.”

Lucy had kissed Logan's pale, painted cheek. Closed the casket so he could finally rest well in a better place.

1981

Hawkins was a small town.

Which meant Lucy saw Jim Hopper often as the months became long years when he returned for good. He was a well put together mess. Grumpy then kind when he wanted to be. Uncaring of this job that required little of him. Sleeping around with women who stared daggers at him afterwards. Tuinal capsules leveled him into a handsome zombie with flesh and bone and not a care in sight. He never talked about Diane or Sara.

Only called Diane when he was drunk and missing her. She remarried. Moved on. It felt unfair for her to move on without him. While he was still hurting.

He called her less.

But, Jim saw Lucy more going about her day. Perfectly adjusted. Beautiful starlet. Something about Lucy Garland was gift wrapped in gold cellophane with a pretty, red velvet bow. The thought turned him on a little. Fuck.

These thoughts gnawed when he was trying to sleep. Lucy in all lace smiling at him and batting her lashes. *Lovely lace*, he dreamed. *Lovelace*. Sometimes he thought of her when he was with another. Maybe, that was wrong.

He started to pull her over in his police car. Just to talk. A friendly game. And then he saw her in bars more. Few drinks and a chat. He always took someone else home. Never asked if she did.

Lucy was the town witch. Little strange shut in. But, she was always there. Always there for him. Even his mother's funeral at the end of '79. She'd been the only person he told that he was a bit glad mom was gone. Because her mind had already left and he couldn't bear the thought of her asking about Sara still.

And Lucy just held him close. With her *Beautiful* by Estee Lauder perfume. Her expensive lotions. Her mauve lips so full and pretty. Those dark, hooded eyes and their depths.

Gift wrapped. Lovelace.

Jim decided he liked to run into her. This person who knew him from before...before all of it. Before death and war.

This Lucy he was getting to know. This painted face. She was something new. Not the girl who idolized her sister and wanted to climb trees and go out partying, but never could. She'd grown up. Blossomed into a beauty. A peculiar beauty with secrets he observed, but never pried into.

How he thought about prying into the buttons of her blouse.

Jim cringed. He never thought about Lucy Garland this way. Their paths crossed and never joined. Never brought up her illness or the rumors of her brief mental break. Same way she left his past alone. They always did each other these courtesies.

He felt something within surge when she so much as looked in his direction. It bubbled in his heart. Spread. Burned as she touched his hand like he was a schoolboy again with a crush.

Hopper had a crush. On his friend. His oldest friend.

Lucy smiled and laughed at his jokes over her usual drink. *The Hideaway* bustled because it was almost a new year. Almost 1982. Jim wondered how many more he would make it through with his lifestyle.

But, it didn't matter when Lucy smiled at him. When he felt the same security enough to return it. He could be crass and apathetic, but not so much around her. There was a great deal of care in their relationship. Like they might be nursing each other back to health.

Her lips were moving.

"What?" He called over the festivities. A hand touched his arm.

"I can barely hear myself, want to go?"

"Before the ball drops?" He joked so she pushed at him. A playful gesture.

Lucy was up and paying her bill so Jim followed. Took the hand she offered to go through the crowds. Warmed. Snow was falling outside. Hawkins became alive with its celebration on this day. And still hushed just for them.

"That's so much better." Lucy ruffled her hair. "I have wine at my place, feel like a glass? Watch the ball drop there and the fireworks won't be as bad. I know you don't like them."

She thought of Jim without trying. Still had his hand.

"Really, I just want to bum a free ride." Lucy giggled again and looked back at him.

"Good thing I was looking to bum some free wine."

They rode together. Chattered over the radio. Lucy kicked her heels aside and his own shoes followed once they got in. Turned up the TV to the party in New York.

"You ever go to that? Looks magical. The city." She poured two glasses. Came around the island to offer his.

"Ah, wasn't for me." Jim thanked her.

"We should toast. To the New Year. May it be even better than the last."

Hopper looked at Lucy there sparkling. Decided it always was. They drank. Glasses set upon the high counter.

"You know, if you believe it, I usually hit the party at the *Blue Velvet*."

"Lucy Garland in a strip club?" Jim laughed openly about it. Blushed when he thought of her hips on that stage. Crawling and swaying slow to music and dancing lights. In all lace, of course.

Lovely as can be.

"Ah, I know some people who work there. Good people. I promised my friend I'd hit the party next time." She didn't know that wouldn't come to pass. Funny, how we could be so blissful of a future despite fear it would come even still.

Time ticked.

"They're about to do the countdown." Lucy sounded giddy now. Cheeks all rosy. Peered up at Jim's softening expression as she set her elbow upon the island. "Shall we count with it, Jim?"

"Sure, Luce." He managed, watching her. Beautiful and happy next to him. Her lush perfume and hair bouncing in its style. Body almost leaning into him there as the television illuminated the room.

"Well?" Lucy turned, still beaming at him and Jim's fingers touched her jaw. Guided her lips into his because he couldn't stop the urge he'd had in his belly for months. A light teasing kiss. Testing the waters. Lucy gave a breathless sound into him, took his wrist. Barely came out to see those gorgeous blue eyes.

"Now, why'd you go and do a thing like that, Jim?" Her fingers were tracing into his knuckles.

"I..." A palm slid to grip her bicep.

"Do it again." Lucy let him come down. Captured her plump mouth fully.

Her arm dropped at the same time midnight hit. Sending the glasses and wine over into the sink. One shattered. Music lifted from the screen. Dreamy hopes and opulent visions of the new year flowed.

Jim was still kissing her. Feverishly. Coaxing her lips open. Tasting of white wine. Her fingers pulled for his flannel shirt.

"Wait." Lucy rushed up for air. Head shaking. Breathless. "What am I doing? We can't...We can't do that."

“Why not?” Jim blurted and she scoffed, pulling from him to pace.

“You can’t just kiss me that way out of the blue,” a finger poked his chest, “when I’ve wanted to kiss you since I was a teenager-”

Jim cupped her face. Kissed her even harder to make his point. Tongue and teeth. Nipping her bottom lip until she was pressing back into him.

“Let’s go upstairs.” Lucy hadn’t been touched by a man since she cut Brenner off. Instantly, she swept him from her thoughts. Let Jim’s hands explore.

Tipsy kisses with him all the way up the steps. Into her bedroom. Fireworks charged beyond the windows in the distance. Lucy got Jim’s shirt off first.

Stopped to fold it. He thought it odd. A little cute too. And she kept doing it. Two piles until she had his jeans.

“Lucy, you don’t have to...” Jim got her to drop the denim and pulled her body into his. The rest of their garments hit the floor. Lucy pressed flush into him. Traced his collarbone and kissed the hot skin there. They fell back into bed with lighter hearts. Rolling around.

She kept her arms down by her head. Almost afraid to touch him once they were in the plush covers. Jim kissed up her wrist and palm. Settled her hand on his shoulder. Encouraged her to grasp at him. She moaned as his lips lowered to her breasts. Hopper took his time to massage the tension from her bones. Let her suck on his fingers and explore his body in return.

“Jim.” She whined at his big hands pulling her thighs apart. Kneading. “I want it. I want to feel you. I’m-ah! Birth control...” A deep rub sent her hips rutting up into his touch. “Fuck.” Nails scratched Hopper’s back. Burnt sugar poured to scorch her skin. Jim kissed her before he pushed inside. Held her there in total darkness and began to pump. Built a rhythm with her clinging to him.

It was pure sin how good she felt here. Every little whine and moan he pulled. Felt greedy to want more and more. Jim thought for a

moment he'd never get enough of Lucy. She cried out when his hand lowered between their bodies. Teased her in a state until she begged. Coaxed an orgasm out. Drank her sigh down.

"Turn over." His low utter sent a thrill down her spine. Dripping still and clutching at the sheets, she did so. Moaning when he pushed back inside despite the snug fit. Face into the pillows Lucy pushed back into him. Felt his touch bruise her hips.

"Fuck me," came the order at last. "Not getting tired on me, are you?"

Jim gave a breathless chuckle. Fucked her into the mattress until her thighs were quivering.

"You have another for me, Lucy?" He saw her fingers twisting the pillows. Muffled her moans. "Almost there, fuck." Jim thrust into her. Smacked hard and fast. Played with her clit again to feel her tighten up, another oncoming rush of climax was betraying her joints.

"Don't stop, Jim, I'm..." Lucy cried out under him. Worked her hips back into his until it ached. Spine curving. Unable to lessen the pressure of his touch. Another peak. Jim followed her this time. Came inside her and finished on her thighs. Sticky and uncaring, Lucy slipped from him. Boneless. Jim fell beside her.

"I've wanted that a long time too. Thought about it." Jim's palm skimmed up her side. A lengthy kiss to seal it.

"I couldn't tell." Lucy shifted so they could get under the covers. Felt Jim nestle in behind her and pull her into his bare chest. Kissed along her shoulder blade.

She almost asked him what he was doing.

Never been held so sweetly after.

Jim breathed her in. Held her like she was truly important. Tears welled at being so overwhelmed. He didn't catch them in the dark. Tucking Lucy's hair aside to lean over for her lips. Another kiss where she tasted that same burning sweetness. She sagged. Lucy let Jim hold her. Nuzzled back into him after getting over her initial

awkwardness. Kissed Jim's scruffy chin and nipped playfully at his lip.

"Happy New Year." She sighed into his body. Melting into the lines of him.

"You too, Luce." Jim let her settle on his arm. Snuggled in. Heard Lucy breathe even and pressed his lips into her hair.

Felt almost happy here. Safer. Hushed.

Chased that feeling into the daylight.

Notes for the Chapter:

Finally got the timelines together, guess we're headed toward S1 now. Thanks all for reading!! Stay and chat if you like :)))

15. Be My Baby

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello guys. Just wanted to try posting this again. Sorry it's so late, I'm trying. Lighter chapter. Jim and Lucy wade their way back to each other as friends. Valentine's Day of 1983 might change a few things. Smut.

January 1983

"It's finalized."

"How're the boys taking it?" Lucy nursed a paper cup of coffee, walking through chilled streets and Joyce sighed.

"They're...taking it. I think Jonathan is helping Will through it better than I could. Built a fort out back. They're talking. Will is seeing his friends a lot ever since I got him that bike." Joyce shrugged. Ice ran from every building. Made them all glitter.

"You did the absolute right thing, it's also the hard thing. Might not seem like it, but you should be proud of yourself." Lucy offered, walking her friend to the general store's door.

"Hey, Joyce. Lucy. You both look nice today." Bob Newby smiled as he opened the door to *RadioShack*. Too sweet for words. Couple icicles fell and barely missed his head. Shattering upon wet stone. Lucy stared at the fractures, inhaling.

"Morning, Bob." Joyce replied and he went in with a bright blush. "Thanks for the ride in. Jonathan is getting the car from the shop today, my damn tire."

"Don't worry about that, the guy likes me. I talked the price down." Lucy winked. Took some sugar and lavender to be fair. "Is Will riding his bike from school?"

"Yes, he's going to the Wheeler house." Joyce held herself. "You should come over for dinner, I owe you."

“You don’t, but dinner sounds fantastic.” Lucy paused. “We’re friends. I haven’t had a girlfriend since...a long time. Ladies at the salon don’t count, they gossip too much.”

“Yeah, I haven’t had time for...” A smile. “Maybe we’ll learn something.”

A chuckle pulled from Lucy.

“Have a good day at work.”

“Thanks for the coffee. Needed it bad.”

“What are friends for?” Lucy shrugged, tossing her empty cup out before she waved so Joyce could open the store.

Smiling still, she peered down at her jeans and sighed to walk back down the block. A body swerved around the corner, nearly knocked her backwards if hands hadn’t sprung out to stop it. The waft of warm cologne damned them both.

“Lucy.” The cigarette fell from Jim’s mouth to slushy pavement.

“Jim.” She wiggled out of his grasp. Cheeks pink from him and the cold. “Morning.”

“Sorry, I...got a call about some kids throwing snowballs at the corner studio's windows.”

“A day in the Hawkins’ life, huh.” She joked and Jim gave a tired grunt, adjusting his hat. Clearly hungover and not in the mood for an early call about something so stupid. “They’re probably long gone.”

“I’ll check for myself, thanks.” He went around her. Colder. Stopped. “Hey, I... Good to run into you, I was thinking about you.”

“Oh?” She swallowed.

They’d managed to avoid each other for months since the incident at his trailer. A weird mating ritual where they still ended up at the same places because of this damn small town, but played a game of quiet side looks without approaching. It was infuriating even for

strangers around them.

“Yeah, I guess we haven’t talked much.” Lucy had continued, puffing.

“Did you want to maybe grab lunch later?” Jim pointed a thumb behind his back. “Benny’s place.”

“Just lunch?”

“Yeah, something light.” He shuffled his feet. Not intimidating right now in full uniform with his blue jacket zipped up tight.

“I’m off today. Couple of errands. But, you take your lunch hour at what, one, still?”

“Mm hm...” Jim gave a nod, lips pressing. “So, I’ll see you...at one. For lunch. Lunch at one.”

“Yes. Lunch. Um, us. At one.” She stuffed cold hands into her pockets. Neither moved. “Don’t get hit with any snowballs. It’ll be a war zone.”

“There won’t be enough room in our cells at the station.” Jim had groaned, steps picking up to go because he had to mentally kick himself in the ass. “See you later, Luce.”

“Bye, Jim.” Lucy went the opposite way. Lips tugging.

** **

Martin Brenner tried extra hard to win Lucy’s affections back. Piles of gifts. Never even judged her clothing when she wore pants. She did as she was told as far as jobs for the lab. Clean up and debrief again. Secrets and lies to be spun.

“This is the latest technology for diabetics, dear. Come see.” Brenner set a clunky machine upon her marble counter. “You insert the tab here. And you have to bleed. Enough for it to be read.”

Lucy didn’t flinch when her finger was pricked. Brenner’s touch was what made her tense. Squeezing to let blood bead and dribble

like strawberry glaze.

“You bleed here. And... *bravissima* .” His hand swept her back as she held a napkin around her finger. “It’ll read your sugar. You can use it to get a better handle on things. Do you like it?”

He asked it like a school boy wanting a treat. Lucy let him kiss her brow.

“I do, thank you, Martin.” She tossed the tab aside.

“Do you want to see Mia this month? I can arrange it.”

“She’ll say what she always does.” Lucy turned to see his eyes. “The little girl saw me last time. Jane. She saw me. She saw us together.”

Martin blinked.

“Eleven was not supposed to be brought down that hallway.”

She was so small with huge brown eyes like a bird. Inquisitive and frightened of this world she hadn’t come to know yet. She looked right into Lucy’s eyes and something resonated.

And then El’s gaze wandered to Martin’s hand on Lucy’s arm. Pulling her into his chest. They looked like a fairy tale. About to share true love’s kiss.

The orderly marched her off.

“She’s magnificent. A budding little rose, she calls me Papa.” Martin touched his chin. Truly happy.

Affections used to control her. Lucy bit her tongue.

“You could train her when she gets older. Show her how to adjust to this life. She won’t be released, Eleven is meant for something so grand. But, imagine it. First and last together as it should be. We’re going to make contact.”

“Contact?” She watched his eyes. Near unstable.

"You opened my world, Lucy. Eleven is going to open this dimension for all of us. Zero to Eleven. First and last. It's almost poetic." Martin caressed her cheek. "You need not worry about her until it's time to."

"Can you bring her something from me?" Lucy asked. "I found it in the basement. Had it washed up. I think she'd like it. I hoped for a little girl of my own to give it to. But, I..."

She offered a green stuffed bunny.

"Please." Lucy pushed it into his hand.

"I'll see that she gets it, you have my word on that." Martin waited there so she exhaled out her nose. Came up and pecked his cheek once. Empty.

"Thank you."

** ** *

Lucy changed her shirt for lunch. Applied a new lipstick and spritzed some fresh perfume. Loathed that she did that. Ignored the glucose machine and drove out to Benny's. Beat Jim there and found a table.

"You ordering the usual?" Benny approached her with no lunch rush today.

"Yes, I was going to wait," she blushed, "I'm, er, meeting Jim."

"Jim? Jim, who now?" Brows lifted high.

"Benny..." Lucy chided. "Hopper."

He slapped his knee for the theatrics.

"I'll be damned. Hear that boys? Lucy and Jim are going to talk like civilized folk again. Our kids are all grown up." Benny announced to their friends playing cards across the way.

"You won the pool, Ben." Earl called back. Laughter erupted. Benny

shot Lucy a wink and went to collect his winnings.

“Hey! That’s not fair.” She whined after him.

“What’s not fair is the silent treatment you two decided to spring on each other.” He peered up at the bell with one hand on Lucy’s shoulder. “And here he is now. Making a pretty lady wait is rude, buddy.”

Jim sucked air into his lips. Gave a tense smile at Lucy’s pouting. Scrunched.

“You didn’t tell her about the-”

“Just did, I won.” Benny’s arms crossed.

“You knew too!” She shot out.

“He nearly tore Earl’s head off,” Benny clapped Jim’s back and passed them. “I’ll get the usual going. Jim, be a gentleman. Pay for the lady’s meal.”

“Oh, no, I got it.” Lucy went for her purse but Benny snatched Jim’s money.

“Don’t worry about it.” He tossed his coat into the booth and plopped down. “I need a smoke bad.”

“Snowballs?” Lucy asked as he stole the ashtray to light up.

“The Gillespies had some issue with an owl in their shed. Big mess. Brought up some old trauma.”

“I hope you read that poor bird his rights.” Lucy’s joke made him pause, lip twitching. Jim seemed lax which meant he was a couple pills into this day. “Thanks for buying lunch, even though Benny bullied you, I’ll get the next one.”

“Next one.” He mused, sucking the end of his cigarette until the cherry glowed white hot. Lucy shrugged.

“Friends can have lunch whenever they feel like it.” She had this

fluttered look. Half dreaming back into her seat. Lucy felt a tingle from her brain stem down her spine. Tugged at the collar of her already unbuttoned blouse. Hot and cold at the same time. Adjusting, she peered at Jim again. Beamed.

He watched those nervous fingers. Still curled up into her own shirt. Brown eyes kept averting.

“Luce, you okay? You look flushed.”

“Just a little light is all,” she rubbed her head, elbow braced on the table. Heavy and mumbling. “Could you...? Could...?”

“Benny, you got something sugary back there?” Jim was on his feet to catch their friend’s attention. “Juice or soda.”

“I got it,” Benny hurried out with a cup for Jim to bring back to Lucy. Holding her head and quivering there. Sweat beading down her neck. They caught it early this time. Jim touched the back of her skull and brought some punch to trembling lips.

“Just sip it.” He helped her manage not to spill on herself for once.

“She okay?” Benny leaned to see.

“Y-Yes.” Lucy felt around Jim’s chest. Blindly grasped his shoulder. “Yes.”

“I’ll get the food out in a few minutes.”

Too many eyes blared into Lucy’s skin.

“I’m fine. I’m fine. It’s just embarrassing.” She grasped the cup with two hands so Jim slid back in across from her. Stares dwindled at a slight swipe of Jim’s palm when Lucy wasn’t looking so they’d stop.

"Gets you quickly."

“It’s usually worse. I get fussy.”

“Not fussy, just need an extra hand. Don’t mind to be that for you. You shouldn’t be embarrassed.” Jim reached over the table to thumb

under her lip, fixing the color that smudged. She warmed and batted those lashes at him.

The moment was interrupted by a bang on the window. A younger woman making an obscene gesture at Hopper. Glaring daggers before she swept down the street. Earl and the boys chuckled while he hid his face in his hands to groan.

“Food’s up.” Benny set two baskets down, rubbing Lucy’s shoulder before she nodded wordlessly to show she was okay now. “Did you even know that one’s name?”

“No.” Jim groaned so Lucy stole the ketchup. “I’m an asshole.”

“Yes, you are, bud. We’ll still keep you around.” Benny’s jest as he walked off made Lucy snicker so she dug into her fries.

“I feel way less embarrassed now.” She passed the red bottle over. Jim’s eyes lifted, a spark in them. “Friends?”

“Think I can manage that much.”

** ** *

They managed. A month and they managed. More light lunches. Little chats during a short walk.

Friends. Lucy had plenty of friends despite the loss of Logan and Mia burning white hot in her heart. Logan in a nice suit beneath the earth. No longer smelling of amber or peaches. Mia and her clipped words at the end of the phone. The forced distance to keep Hawkins Lab happy.

Lucy had Benny and the boys. She had Joyce and their lengthy conversations. Karen always gave her sweet advice at the salon despite the Hawkins gossip.

And she had Jim. Pulling her over for fun because he was bored during a patrol. Jim and his kind eyes that hid so much. Not enough. Hungover and lax once he got some pills down. They laughed at each other's jokes and shared soft touches, that was enough.

Did Jim want more when Lucy leaned into him with those lashes fluttering so pretty? Did she want more every time Jim's eyes softened before he gave her a smile. Swept an arm around her frame.

Yes, they wanted more during every second of it. These moments where they felt safe and nurtured. Certain for a fleeting beat that the world might let them breathe again.

But, they were friends. Friends who went out more and worried about how they looked or smelled around the other.

Had themselves convinced it could stay this static.

Nothing was ever set in stone, not while a mighty river ran so vast and eroded every little carving. Lucy sometimes thought she saw her life etched on every bleeding wall like the sovereign Pharaohs of old. Glistening in the budding, dewy morning light. Warmth she'd never feel on her face. No one could see the damning writ and judge the things she'd done, only her.

Valentine's Day of 1983 came around. Lucy wasn't working. Jim took half the day off. Flo only shook her head at him.

"A rest from all that rest, Hop?" She quipped, eyes on the bag in his hand. "Are those gifts?"

"Just...some stuff for Lucy, she had an episode last week. I'm just..."

"Say no more. Go see your girl." Flo waved him off. Jim's cheeks burst pink.

"Flo, she's not-"

"You bought gifts for a woman, on Valentine's Day no less, without making me do it, Hop." Flo smacked a file aside. Peered up through her glasses. "And she doesn't show up here trying to slash your tires like the others."

"That was one time." Jim muttered.

"Yes, and your upset following has dwindled since you started

talking to the Garland girl.”

“She really a witch, Chief?” Callahan came up behind Flo to offer his report. “Might have you under a love spell.”

“They say that house is haunted, better buy some sage too. My wife swears by it.” Powell chimed in from his desk. Chuckles erupted on Jim’s behalf.

“How about you two make some magic and turn all your reports in on time, yeah?” Jim found his last cigarette which Flo snatched to toss out. Offering him his keys.

“Don’t smoke before you kiss that poor girl, Hop. She’s sick enough. Now, get lost.” Flo shut the window on him. Jim grumbled all the way to his car. Drove to Lucy’s place to see her standing on the front lawn. Admiring the garden. Taking pictures as she walked about the grass in some clean tennis shoes.

“Jim?” She turned upon seeing him. Bounced all the way over and almost knocked him to the ground tossing her arms around his neck. “Come see! Look! They’re perfect! I did it!” An excited hand tugged him into the yard beyond the hedges and willow tree. “Look at them!”

Dahlias of all bright colors. Popped up and bloomed full. Not even straining during the colder month. They all unfurled and grinned fully at him. Swaying in the breeze.

“I told myself I was going to do it, I was going to keep some flowers alive for a season and I did!” She bent over for more pictures. “I didn’t kill something for once, damn it.”

“They’re great, Luce.” Jim laughed at her creeping around in a billowy tunic dress she’d just tossed on after the shower colored a rustic orange. Threw on shoes and reeled outside to take pictures while the sun was high despite the slight nip in the crisp air.

“*Fucking* great, at least,” she corrected, “it’s been a struggle since last summer to get these babies up.” The dress slipped off her shoulder. “I’m making lunch if you’re hungry. Big chicken sandwich.

Toasted. Can't eat it all." More snaps clicked. Lucy trying to get every angle possible. Cute.

"I could eat." Jim swallowed when she stood taller to beam at him. So pretty there in the sun and wind with the flowers dancing for her. Washed and clean. No makeup. Messy locks piled into a clip on her crown and falling around her face.

"You're not in uniform."

"I took a half day. Changed out of the khaki. Brought you some stuff, it's..."

"For Valentine's Day?" She licked plush lips. Averted her eyes. "I got you something too actually. Just a small thing."

"Right." They both shuffled. Just friends. On Valentine's Day. Jim followed her into the house. Set his paper bag on the counter while she put her camera away.

"Food or gifts first?" She asked.

"I'd say gifts, one thing needs to go in your fridge." Jim gestured before she went to the closet for a box with Jim's name in the corner. "You first."

"Let's see." She peeked inside the bag, settled his gift next to it.

"Careful, that..." Jim came and grasped the first gift. Cringed at himself. A little cactus with a dark fuchsia flower on top.

"I'm prickly?" Lucy laughed and cupped the small pot. "Trying to say something, huh."

"No, it was a good idea when I bought it." Jim looked nervous there. "You were always saying how much you hated flowers and couldn't keep them alive. Guess that's revoked though. I hear a cactus is easy to care for and the flower's that color you like to wear."

A softer smile crossed Lucy's face.

"I love it." She bit her lip, eyes lowering. "Believe me, the flowers

outside won't last. Guess I'm enjoying them while I can. This little guy can sit on my counter." Lucy placed it on a dish. "Adds to the room, I think."

"Don't hit me for the next thing."

Lucy pulled a heart shaped box out. Face flat.

"Jim...chocolates?"

"Girls like chocolates, but you have a refined palate—"

"The no-fun-allowed disease."

"Refined palate. So I threw the junk out..." He ate it. "...and replaced it with your favorite snacks."

Lucy laughed pretty hard when she opened it.

"You made me a heart shaped veggie platter." Her head tipped into Jim's shoulder. "Flowers and chocolates designed for Lucy Garland only. I get it, Jim."

"I was hoping you would."

"God, I hate that I got you something so normal." A box pushed at Jim while she went to the fridge. Paper tore and he stilled so Lucy crossed to explain.

"You said you broke your old man's pocket knife when you went up to the Etowah with Benny and them. Seemed upset about it. I tried to find one like it and the salesman bragged about this one. He even offered to engrave your last name into the side there. See?"

"Lucy, this is..." Jim felt it and gave a nod. Blue eyes lifting to her. "Thank you. I actually got you something else. Didn't want to leave it in the joke bag."

"What is it?" She watched him settle the knife away carefully and reach into his pocket.

"Turn around."

“Not being arrested, am I?” Lucy waited and caught the glimmer of a chain. Tried to see the necklace he was settling around her. Froze when his fingers shifted loose hair aside to clasp it. Jim let her go to the mirror. A delicate gold chain with a sky blue jewel framed by tiny diamonds, shaped like a teardrop.

“It’s your birthstone, the lady said women are crazy about their birthstones.”

“It’s beautiful.” Glimmering there against her skin. Lucy crossed to kiss his cheek affectionately. “Thank you.” Jewelry that didn’t feel heavy on her bones. Jim leaned in and stopped himself. Both of them caught up in lingering stares. Searching.

“How about we, um...” She had to look aside to function. “Food?”

“Yeah.” Jim broke to chuckle so she went around him. Condiments shuffled about while Lucy cut a fresh hoagie roll down. Jim sliced the chicken and they piled the sandwich full. Took both of them to cut it in half.

“It’s perfect.” Lucy decided. They sat across each other from the couch balancing plates to catch crumbs and fallen tomatoes. Her thumb swept some mayo from his unshaven chin, giggling before she flicked channels about.

“Did you have more plans today?” Lucy had asked when the credits on one show rolled. She’d stretched her legs out into Jim’s lap either way. Settling in to get comfortable.

“Not a one.” He was watching the screen and massaging her knee. “You?”

“I decided to use a day off as an actual day off. Lazy day. No errands.” A hum followed. “That feels good.”

Friends give each other gifts. Friends relax on a couch together. Jim rationalized it a thousand ways. Swallowed a hard lump in his throat. Friends can think about sliding their hands higher. Contemplate the moan Lucy would give if he touched her.

“What a rebel.” Came his remark. Lucy turned on her back to

stretch her arms over the rest. Dress hanging loose around her body. The lace of her cherry red bra peeked out. A stream of sunlight cast over her frame.

Ethereal siren bathing on the beach. Jim pictured warm sand and rippling waves rocking her back on forth.

His fingers sunk under the hem of the thin dress. Massaged flesh. Lucy's eyes drew to the TV again. Nerves prickling up at his touch. Chest lifting, an exhale tremored. He kept kneading, both of them staring at the television and taking nothing in. Jim slipped a little higher. Squeezed.

Half a breathy squeal gasped from her lips.

"Don't tell me you're ticklish." Jim's head tilted with a twinkle in his eye.

"Okay, I won't." Lucy pushed herself up before he could react and kissed him. Hands on his face to feel the shock dissipate. Jim had one arm behind her back holding her up and the other around her legs still bent in his lap. She came out an inch. "Uh, oh."

"No, nope." Jim went back in for more. Kissed her breathless into the couch. Scruff rough against her neck and collar.

"Jim..." Her sigh followed fingers into his hair. Coaxing him to continue. Straps slipped down her shoulders so he could trail over the soft skin. Inhaling her perfumes and lotions.

"Yeah?" Breath warmed.

"I want you. This. I want this." His head lifted so their eyes could lock. Another tug brought her dress and bra down.

Lucy moaned, eyes closing at the feel of his lips and scruff upon her chest. Leaving little pink marks. Jim inhaled into her dress. Sunk lower off the couch as he pushed the skirt over her hips. Legs slipped off the couch and his fingers tugged at her underwear.

"Jim!" She yanked up when the fabric slipped down her legs.

“Hmm?” Those broad palms tugged her bottom to the end of the couch, unworried. Crept up hot thighs to open them.

“What are you....?” His mouth pushed into her legs. That fucking stubble scratching sensitive skin. “Oh.” Lucy plopped back, one leg shifted back up on the sofa. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

Jim gave a chuckle into her skin, hitched her opposite leg over his shoulder. Fingers twisted into the sofa cushions. Been a while since a man laid her back and spent time doing this. Lucy tossed her head back, aimlessly grabbed for the hand on her hip holding her in place.

“We’re in trouble, aren’t we, Jim?” She bit her lip.

“Do you care?” He asked between deep kisses, lapping at her clit so the reply was muffled. Vibrating her.

“I mean, I know I should. Fuck, I like you though. And your mouth...” She rambled on. “Did... *ngh* ...you come over here thinking...?”

“Lucy.” Jim’s head came up. She puffed to see him.

“Yeah?” Her breasts rose and fell.

“You ever just relax and let a guy do his job?” Jim licked his lips and palmed one of her breasts.

“Never in all my life.”

“You’re gonna start today.” That hot mouth was on her again.

Fingers opening her up for obscene, wet kisses. Tongue sweeping inside and over the bud until he closed his lips to suckle. Building her up. Inch by inch. Thrilled and hard at the feel of Lucy’s body unfurling.

Jim stopped to rub her. Replaced his thumb with his tongue after pushing the little hood back. Puffy and wet for him. So gorgeous. Jim moaned into her mound. Licked into her and back up. Until she bucked desperately and begged him not to stop.

And he did. Which earned two hands pulling at his arms. Few curses too.

“Wait...Wait. I was almost...”

“I’ll get you there, stop worrying so much.” Jim pulled her up into his chest. She kissed him back into the carpet. Tried to take control. Got turned over by his much larger frame. Made it a game and wiggled out from under him. Started to crawl away until a hand grabbed her ankle.

“I’m resisting arrest.” Lucy giggled. “You gonna punish me, Chief?” Jim hugged her back into his chest.

“And just when I was being so nice to you, Luce?” Jim tortured her neck and unclasped the bra to tug it off her body. Dress bunched around her waist, Lucy pressed her bottom back into him. Managed to twist around and slide her arms around his neck.

“Maybe I want to be good to you too.” Lucy ran her nose along his chest. Inhaled sugar all aflame. Palmed him until she got his belt open. Jim nipped at her bottom lip, pushed Lucy into the carpet and jerked her over on her hands and knees.

She moaned at him being rough with her. Taking her exactly how he wanted. Spreading her legs to see her drip for him. Lucy dipped down until her spine curve. Spread. Tremored when he slicked himself against her folds.

“You’re quiet now.” Jim teased. She turned to see him, huffing in irritation.

“What do I need to do to get you to fuck me here?” Lucy cried out when he pushed in to the hilt. Jim leaned over her, too amused.

“Just had to ask nicely.” Fingers tucked her hair aside.

“Please?” She whined, already trying to work back into him. Filled to the brim. Jim hushed Lucy, covered her with his warm body and snaked a hand down to play with her again. Groaned when she clenched up and snapped shallow thrusts.

Unable to lessen the pressure, she slurred little pleas. Begging for more.

“Do you like this dress?” Jim asked calmly. Pushing up to pump with some rhythm. Lucy felt a tug and gave a barely audible reply.

“...No.”

Fabric tore down her back. Leaving her naked and him mostly clothed. Belt clicking as he fucked her into the carpet. Red marks cast all over her skin. Nails dug into the floor. Jim started pounding into her unabashed, fingers quick between her legs.

“Jim.” Lucy wiggled. Muscles beginning to clench. “Fuck, I’m already there.”

He knew. Wasn’t worried. Let her curse him out and climax. Her walls clenched so tight, he slipped out. Stroked himself a couple times and brought Lucy up, fully intent on putting her in bed and never letting her leave today.

They made it halfway up the steps before he was inside her again. Back pressed firm into the stairs. Lucy had her legs around his hips. Brought him down for a messy kiss and started getting his shirt off. Heels kicked his pants down. Jim held her wrists into the carpet. Thrust through the ache and pushed her thighs wider apart. Loved that she was moaning and mad for him.

Jim chased his own release. Let her hold him and whisper dirty things about how good he was fucking her. Groaned into her neck and nudged their heads together after he’d finished.

“Bed,” Lucy was pawing at him, “bed.” They dragged and finally made it into the blankets. He massaged her sore frame. Dipped back down between her thighs and played. Tongue and fingers working her for as long as it took to orgasm. Jim was a patient man. She wiggled and cried out.

Bodies slicked in filth and sweat, they curled together. Lucy drew up to use the bathroom and turned all fans on high. Sighed back into his arms.

Jim passed out holding her close. The daylight flickered into the curtains so Lucy turned into him. Decided a nap was the perfect idea. He woke to that same daylight hours later. Lucy kissing up his jaw. Her hand tracing down to cup him. She needed him. Jim shifted on his back. Sleepy kisses trailed before she sunk down. Rode him.

He gripped those hips and rocked her in tune. Looked up at Lucy curved and moaning. Beautiful with the flickers of hot sun on her skin and hair. Glittering gold. Curling up her body like elegant vines. She finished and slipped down Jim's body. Kissed her way to his shaft.

"Lucy, fuck." His mouth fell open. She didn't get to play like this. Jim got close and blindly grasped her shoulder. Tried to warn her before she choked.

Which, she still did.

Lucy gasped, splattered release on his thighs and covered her mouth.

"I'm sorry." She blinked watery eyes and licked him from her lips and fingers. "I did it wrong. Sorry."

Jim pushed himself up. Still out of breath.

"Lucy, don't apologize to me ever again." He brought her in for a kiss. She broke to laugh, head on his shoulder.

"Want to take a shower and order pizza for dinner? Sausage and pepperoni..." She came out to catch his eyes. "That's not an innuendo, I'm just hungry."

"Fair enough." Jim heaved her naked body from the bed. Lucy held onto his shoulders. Giggled all the way to the shower. Thought she heard The Ronettes singing something delightful and candied for the occasion distantly. Lucy smiled again.

For every kiss you give me, I'll give you three...

Eyes on Jim before a stolen kiss.

Be mine.

Friends again. Not asking for more. Not yet of course. Orange groves in full bloom.

Sometimes just being held was enough.

Notes for the Chapter:

I so appreciate anyone who follows this story or my writing. Really, I do. Please feel free to talk to me below or on my writing blog, Alias-B :) Thanks!

16. My Forever Antagonist

Notes for the Chapter:

Season one kicks off!! Chaos ensues when Hawkins wakes up. Sorry for the late update, I'm really working to keep both my fics afloat. Sexual references. Brenner being Brenner. Ty all! Enjoy!

Fall 1983

Maybe they'd just gotten themselves in the same predicament.

What are we doing?

What will we do next?

But, they were happy so damn it all.

Jim even granted her semi public kisses. Naturally the entire town knew they were screwing, but that had been in talks for months.

Lucy Garland was always smiling. Around town. Being the scenes. Even when Brenner came to visit and lecture her. Undaunted by her display of teeth. Not that she was listening unless she got a short call with Mia.

"I miss you." Lucy spoke out of turn once. "I miss Logan too."

A beat.

"Logan was a good man. And he loved you." Mia struggled on the other end.

The line went dead.

"Better?" Martin had asked, pulling the receiver away.

"Thank you for the phone call." Lucy clasped her hands in her lap. Didn't look at him.

“Still upset with me over one broken promise.” He observed, carefully coming to sit mere inches from her. She stared at the black TV across the way, because it was so much more interesting. “You cannot stay angry forever.”

“You had Logan killed. You knew what he meant to me.”

“He broke the rules. Anyone else I find out was involved will suffer the same fate.” Martin took her wrist. Made her look at him. “Had he not been undermining our operation, I never would have had you murder that poor girl. Such a waste.”

“Logan’s crime was compassion, I’m sure he’d never regret that much. Wherever he is, he’s forgiven.”

“People who love you die, Lucy. Tragic thing about sirens, the people they draw in only drown.” Martin thumbed her jawline and stood up. Repeated himself. “You cannot stay like this at me forever, it’s childish.”

“Why haven’t you drowned yet?” Lucy came to her feet as well. Fists clenching.

“Are you still running around with that Police Chief?” Martin pulled his coat on, head cocking. A smile drew when Lucy averted her eyes. To the neglected piano she longed to play again. “A long phase.”

“It just happens, we were friends before...all of it.”

“I’m not mad. Do I seem upset?” He sounded almost convincing. “You’re free to pursue life out here. Within our restrictions.”

“You smell of saltwater, Martin, that’s called envy.” She spoke without missing a beat. Brenner gave his usual neutral face of displeasure.

“You chose someone incompetent. For your sake, I hope it stays that way.” Brenner went to the door. Peered at her. “Don’t forget yourself, Lucy.”

“A sick girl like me could never.” She came to him. Pecked his

cheek in parting. Let him inhale her hair. Eyes locked together. An uneasy beat. "Drive safe, Martin, you know I worry about you."

Crash. Crash. Crash. Die. Die. Die.

The door opened and smacked shut.

** ** *

Jim and Lucy both had their sharp days.

Days where Jim was irritable and stuffing more pills. Downing alcohol and waking feeling of actual shit. When Lucy's visits didn't spark him like they normally would. Where a smile was just a little tougher. Days where Lucy was achy and fatigued. Unable to go about her business and frustrated. Lashing out and crying until Jim put her to bed and held her.

They spent a lot of time not speaking in bed. Bouts of angry sex. Passion fucking. Everlasting. Sessions of silence and tangled limbs because sometimes life just ached.

Neither asked to be more.

Lucy had dreams about rotting people. Mom. Dad. Logan. Kristen. The bombshell, Sidney Connor. These people she drowned with her siren's call.

Dreams where they held her down and Brenner cut her naked skin open. Started to pull slippery pieces out. Visions of a rotting world like this one twisting every single way. Where fleshy monsters roamed and hungered. Brenner would shackle her to metal bars and laugh and laugh and fucking laugh. Stuffing cotton into her mouth. Wiring her jaw shut so no scream could howl to the pale moon.

Because she was too weak to escape and stop him.

The piercing wails always upset Jim even if he said nothing about that. Just shoved another pill and rocked her. Probably his PTSD. Lucy would thrash and struggle until he was yelling too. Waking her in silken covers and pillows.

"Two this week. Three last week. You don't get them this often, Luce." Jim finally spoke up as the clock struck seven in the morning.

"It's just worse in the fall season, you know," she'd wiggled away from him, "my parents." Naked, she sat up on the edge of the bed. Let her feet touch the carpet. "What day is it?"

"Sunday." Jim stretched. "November 6th."

"You ever feel like you're stuck in time? Sometimes I think I never left '65."

"You're safe in 1983." Jim kissed her head, rubbed his face and got up.

"Do you really believe that?" Lucy turned to see him pulling his underwear on. "Jim?"

"Sometimes, I wake up and that's what I have to tell myself." He fiddled with the blue band on his wrist. Eyes lifting to see her expression. "It's early, let's get cleaned up and go to Benny's for breakfast."

"Cheeseburger with a messy egg does sound better than sex right about now." Lucy joked, sighing to stand. Slipped her robe on. Jim turned, dropping his shirt.

"You think so?"

Lucy put her hands on her hips and padded up to him. Lips lifting.

"I'm always open to being proved wrong, James." She let the robe slip from one shoulder and made for the bathroom.

"Whatever you say," Jim grew cheeky, "*Lucretia*."

Lucy skidded to stop and whip around. Eyes alight and wide at him. Responded slower.

"How long have you known that?"

"Since I made fun of Mia's name in high school. She told me yours

and swore me to secrecy.” Jim missed Mia Garland too. Stopped asking about her when Lucy’s responses became shorter.

Lucy glared at him. Brought her robe up and cinched the waist tight. Hair flicked.

“I hope you like lonely, cold showers, Jim Hopper.” She cocked her head and shut the door.

“C’mon, Lucy, don’t do that.” Jim was laughing on the other end. The shower turned on. “You think I can’t pick this lock?” A handle jimmied. Lucy was shampooing when he broke in and pulled the curtain back.

“Jim!” She giggled as he pushed in under the water. Suds dripped along her slick body. An arm heaved her in so Lucy gave a pout, wet hands smoothing Jim’s damp hair back.

“It’s not a bad name.” Jim’s lips came to her temple. Lucy hummed and nudged under his jaw, arms tucked between them. Clearly forgiving him only because of how great it felt to be held. Steam filled the air so Lucy tipped back and let Jim run his fingers into black locks. Water dripped all down heated skin. He kissed her neck with a lowering murmur. “What if I said: Lucretia, I’m going to fuck you up against this shower wall? Hm? Forgive me?”

“You know what’s really sexy, Jim?” Lucy drew her lips up his neck. Let him palm her body until she was pinned into the wall. “Benny shouting *order up* from the kitchen.” She laughed at his fallen expression. Wrapped her arms around his neck to nuzzle her nose into his affectionately. “You can call me Lucretia. Only when it’s just us and you believe what you said earlier. Only when you believe we’re safe and sound.”

Hands cupped his jaw and Jim kissed her full under the spray. Brushed their noses again and traced his lips along her cheek. One last sweet touch of their lips.

“Lucretia.”

Eyes met in sync. Lucy let herself feel it too. One moment in this

chaos. In their flawed existences. Where they were secure.

And all she smelt was cinnamon.

** ** *

“Order up!” Benny swooped in with two baskets. “Lovebirds.”

Jim punched his arm and got smacked with a rag.

“Benny, you’re the light of my life.” Lucy had her legs curled under her in the booth. Leaning forth on her elbows to pluck up a fry.

“You two should hit the Etowah with Earl and I next week.” Benny paused. “Separate tents.”

“You’re sweet, but I’m afraid I’d be no fun on a camping trip.”

“Flo would ream my ass if I took time off short notice.” Jim added, reaching for the ketchup. “Next time, Ben.”

“Flo’s gonna ream your ass when you come in hungover again. Starting to think you like it.” Benny chuckled, hands on his hips. “But, I’ll hold you to it. Lucy, keep the Chief in line for us, will you?”

“I’ll do my very best.” She touched her forehead to salute so Benny leaned in, tapping his jaw until she kissed his cheek. “You have my word.”

“Still our best girl, we’ll catch you something out there.” He winked, cheeks heated.

“And I will look forward to that. You know I love to brag about you, Benny.”

“Lucy, I might have to sweep you up.”

“Benny, darling, I thought you’d never admit it.” She played with a bright smile. Jim scoffed across the way.

“I can have him arrested, I’ll come up with something.” He passed the ketchup over.

“Only cause he knows I’ll win the lady.” Benny touched Lucy’s shoulder. “Enjoy breakfast, you two. Don’t be strangers.”

“You know we’ll always be your best customers, Benny.” Lucy quipped while he turned to go. Light as a feather. Still blushing. “I’ll need this for the workday ahead. Big event tomorrow.”

“Vet?” Jim’s brow quirked.

“Yeah, large family.” Egg yolk spilled out the bottom of her burger with one bite. Coating her fingers to be licked. “Was going to run some errands after the service in town, I’m out of everything.”

“That’s probably because you’re always bothering the Police Chief.” Jim wiped his stubble with a napkin and got kicked in the leg. He laughed into the paper.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to help a girl out after work. Use those big, strong arms.” Flirt.

“It’s why you keep me around.” Jim finished his fries and was now stealing from Lucy’s basket.

“I love when we’re on the same page.” She gushed. Sparkling and blissful this day. Secrets lurking around every corner. “Take a nice walk through main street with all the fall colors. Dinner. And the fresh air could do you good, Jim.”

Comically, he lit up a cigarette, brows lifting again.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow,” Jim agreed. “Five?”

“I’ll be ready.”

** ** *

Life happens when you’re not thinking about it. When it’s boxed up in a corner unable to take up space. Lucy didn’t think much of it upon her drive home that night.

Stars glimmering for her after the lengthy day of preparation. The Supremes played from the radio, soft as can be. One hand reached to

adjust the rearview mirror at a stop sign.

Life waited for her in the backseat. Logan and his blue lips. Smiling sweetly. Obscene and dead. Smelling of nothing.

"Blood runs slick as oil when it pours fresh." He whispered with two yellow eyes. Beaming like headlights. Dead.

A gasp stifled so Lucy didn't cry out. Twisting to see nothing. Nothing.

Street lamps blinked overhead, sending her veins in a surge. Child's laughter pulled and two bikes circled the corner.

"Hi, Miss Garland!" Will Byers was blinking his huge eyes at her window with little Dustin Henderson behind him. Skidding to stop. Both balancing on one side of their bikes. Will frowned. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you." Lucy had a hand firm against her chest. Exhaling.

"No, it wasn't you." She breathed slower then offered a smile. "Lucy's fine, Will."

"Habit." He beamed.

"It's late, boys."

"Long campaign." Dustin's eyes crinkled.

"I hope you're beating all the monsters. Making the streets safer for a girl like me." Lucy held her foot on the brake with no one on the road behind her.

"Cast any good spells lately?" Will was chipper after a fun day with his friends.

"Hmm," Lucy tapped her chin, "between you and I, I'm trying to bottle bravery. Might be nice to have some in my back pocket. Just in case. Don't you think?"

"What's the secret?" Dustin added with some glee. Lucy beckoned them closer.

“Staying close to your good friends on nights like this.” She wiggled her nose and gave a wink. “Bravery will follow with that alone. Witch's trade secret, feel it in your heart and smell it on the air. That's what makes it real.”

“Milady speaks the truth.” Dustin's jest caused her to smile and laugh.

“Will you boys be able to get home safe?” There were a few teens walking the streets.

Nothing happened in Hawkins.

“Yeah, it's not far!” Will mounted his bike with Dustin in tow.

“Tell your mothers I said hello.”

“We will!” Came the chorus. Lucy watched them round the corner with swift speed, starting to race. Let them go on. Pulled forward toward her own street. Did her little routine with a glass of red wine. Reached for the remote just as the lights cut.

Something fluttered Lucy's spine. Made the little hairs on the back of her neck stand. Chilled, she picked up a flashlight and closed her silken robe to go outside in some slippers.

The entire street was dark. Neighbors peered out over their hedges. Chattering.

“Lucy, you doing alright?” Benny crossed his lawn and came down the street. A chunky flashlight in hand.

No.

“Yes, it just startled me.” Eyes lifted to the stars. “I have candles and batteries.”

“Hopefully, they get this squared away.” Benny flicked his light about the street, other hand on his hip to sigh. “They said a storm's coming in this week.”

“Smells like it.” Lucy turned to him. Away from that dark blue

abyss. Wisps of black hair sweeping. "Thank you, Benny."

She hugged him. Tight as she could. Pressed into his warm chest to inhale the lingering savory smell of his diner and hand soap. He only chuckled at her, hand smoothing.

"What's this for?"

"You always looked out for me, I've never thanked you for it." Lucy mumbled into his shirt then peered up.

"You never have to thank me, Lucy, just keep enjoying my food and laughing at my bad jokes." He cracked a grin that was infectious. Cheeks warm. Lucy exhaled into the night air, nodding.

"That much I can always do."

** ** *

"Did your power go out?" Lucy had asked the next day, eyes elsewhere while she arranged some flowers about. "Last night."

"No, I heard it was mostly east Hawkins that got hit." Frank set a box of brochures on their front counter while his wife hung little drapes over each chair. All so uniform.

Lucy had dreamed last night. Of these great tears in her flesh. Gaping wounds pulling apart. Heavenly lights streaming out like god rays. She dreamed of those same tears opening upon time and space.

These deadly lights echoing out to blind her. And the screams that howled with that. Fighting and clawing to just be heard.

"Lucy?"

"Sorry." She turned to another pot, moving it into place. "Yes?"

"When did your power come back?" Beverly continued.

"Oh, some time in the night while I was sound asleep." She shrugged her shoulders. "I'll get the last of the arrangements from back." Heels clicked off. She went for the phone in their back office.

Punched the numbers.

One ring. A second.

“Dr. Brenner speaking.”

“Martin.” Lucy tremored. “What have you done?”

“Lucy, we’re very busy.” Tense.

“What did you do?” She sounded more accusatory.

“I don’t want you to worry.” He said slower. “We have it handled.”

“Have *what* handled?”

An exhale.

“The girl escaped.”

Air sucked away.

“What?” She hissed, almost dropping the phone. “Eleven? Into Hawkins? And Mia?”

“She didn’t see it happen and has only been questioned. Do not come here. We’ll communicate our next moves to you. The girl can’t have gone far.”

“Put Mia on the phone. I want to hear her voice. Or you will see me there.” Lucy demanded, gripping the receiver. Martin gave an aggravated sigh. Left for a minute and returned.

“Speak to her.”

“Lucy.” Mia gasped out over the line.

“Mia. Mia, are you hurt?”

“No. I’m alright. I’m okay. Listen to him today.” *Only today.* Mia gave a shaky breath. Lucy pictured her. Wheels turning. Shuddered and fierce “We’ll communicate with you first. Understand?”

“Yes.” Lucy peered behind her. “Yes, I understand.”

The line cut.

Lucy lowered it, eyes elsewhere.

Thought of little Jane clawing her way into this new world.
Through the forest.

Don't look. Don't make noise.

Her heart became a humming bird flitting all directions within a tightening rib cage.

Returning with her arms full. Lucy smacked each ornate arrangement into their respective places. Froze. Gripped a counter and bent over to breathe. Nice and even. A hand came to her shoulder.

“Frank, grab her candy.” Beverly swept hair aside. Held Lucy steady when she began to hitch sporadic sounds.

When had the functioning cut? Just now? When she first walked into Hawkins lab?

She imagined Jane stepped out under the sun for the first time. Free of Brenner. Scared. Hopeful. Lost. Something snapped inside her. Those metal heartstrings that held her to this Earth where Brenner liked her.

Beverly was inching a chocolate bar to Lucy's mauve lips. Made her eat some until more color returned and her hands stopped shaking.

“Look, take the day. We have it handled.” Frank was petting her back. “God, those damn doctors still haven't gotten this dose correct. I have half a mind to speak with them myself.”

“What would you'd say?” Beverly scoffed at her husband's dramatics.

“I'd say my wife would like a word because I didn't think that far.” He smiled warmer. Tension left and Lucy smiled a little. Hand lifting

to assure them she was okay.

Lucy saw her flushed reflection in the mirror. Surrounded by two people who nurtured her. She let herself be a daughter for once. Learned to be cared for again. Remembered how it felt.

“Sometimes I think they don’t want it to be right.”

Only because it made her more docile.

But, with that last cord snapping. Every sense woke up. A flush of spicy, sweet cinnamon quelled. Frank and Beverly helped her to sit. Talked in soothing tones until she was well again. Until her hands stopped shaking.

“Take the week. You’ve worked too many long hours these last months.” Beverly added. Lucy only nodded.

“For my health.”

** **

The first place she skidded into was the Police Station. Having to cancel her date with Hopper in person.

“Flo, I need to see-” Lucy looked up at Jim and his men huddled around a desk. Map spread. Few civilians seated around as well while Flo chattered into the phone. “Chief Hopper.”

“Go ahead and get this started.” Everyone moved so Jim came toward Lucy, hands on her elbows to bring her aside. “Lucy, sorry, I wanted to call...you’re hours early. I was supposed to get you.”

“I can’t...” She exhaled and shook her head. “What’s going on?”

“Will Byers is missing. I didn’t think it was anything, but they-”

“I saw Will.” She narrowed. Jim’s eyebrows jumped up so he came closer to her level. Fingers pressing.

“You saw him? Where?”

“Last night. He was riding his bike home with the Henderson boy.” She blurted forth. “I...I just watched them leave.”

“We found his bike two hours ago in the forest.” Jim paused. Lucy inhaled his woody soap and something tart. Fear. Was Jim afraid of this? The smoky twang of anticipation clouded it. All his memories threatening to bubble up. “Lucy, you were one of the last people to see him.”

“I...” She felt this chill rush her spine. “Oh, Joyce.”

“Hey, talk to me.” Big hands pressed her shoulders taut. “What do you remember? Was he upset?”

“No, he was happy. I was driving home. Stopped and I just said hello to him and Dustin. They rode off. They were joking. Why, do you think he ran away? Will isn’t that boy. I know him and his brother well enough. Joyce is my friend. And the lights...”

“The lights?” Jim repeated, looking like he was still nursing some hangover and in no mood for this. A distance swept his eyes. Nothing happened in Hawkins. Nothing. “The power outage.”

“They were just flickering, I had a funny feeling. Like when you can smell a storm coming, you know, on the wind.” Lucy’s eyes darted, cheeks growing splotchy. Jim licked his lips and stood taller.

“We’re getting search parties together. I’ll be tied up until we find him.”

“Of course, can I sign up with Flo? To help?” She touched Jim’s arm and he gave a distracted nod. “Look, I’ll see you around. If I can help you, just...call.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jim gripped her shoulders and grazed his lips into her hairline. “I have to head back out.”

“Find Will.” Lucy offered as he went. Her own heart sputtering too quick to take this all in. Eyes on Jim while he went into the autumn air.

There was something peculiar about the back of him as he walked

away. Framed in daylight. Broad. Quietly taking the would in. More than he let on. She always wondered what was on his mind.

“Flo, can I-?”

The older woman was already offering a pen and clicking her manicured nail into the clipboard. Still on the phone

“Thanks.” Lucy signed her name and number. Took a pamphlet of the locations. Another payphone greeted her down the street. Lucy pressed the door shut and dialed again.

“Dr. Brenner.” Martin sounded more on edge this time.

“Did you take Will Byers?”

“We’re aware he’s missing.” Came the reply. “Lucy, go home.”

“I’m going to come there whether you like it or not. What have you done?” She spat venom. “Tell me.”

“We made contact.” He sounded awed.

Lucy only seethed.

“Show me.”

A lengthy pause. Leaves dancing.

“How soon can you get here?”

“Under twenty.” Lucy dropped the phone and skidded back to her car. Swerved to go off.

Jim watched her scramble out of that phone booth from his Blazer. Blinked. Stuffed a pill and drove the opposite direction.

Lucy practically rushed into Brenner’s arms when she arrived. Pulling aimless at his expressive Italian coat.

“Come, this way.” He took her elbow and pressed the small of her back. Intimately. Almost possessive. Suits and scientists rushed all directions while they went below. Lucy’s gaze snapped around. Down

another hallway into a prep room. "The environment is unsafe." He yanked for a white suit. "Put this on."

"Martin." She took his face to stop him. Really breathed deep. He avoided her eyes which was strange. "You smell frightened." Raspberries bleeding red and hot under a buttery, flaky crust.

Brenner pulled from her in response.

"Dress." He picked up his own outfit. Tense as can be. Lucy stared at his back. Spine curving when he pulled his suit on before she followed. Martin's hands hurried to push rubber gloves on her. Duct taping them into place. "Hurry."

Lucy zipped herself up into a suit that was much too big for her. Snapped a black belt around her waist and tried to inhale slower.

"This way." Brenner took Lucy's hand and gripped a gun. She didn't ask why. "Stay right behind me."

"Alright." Lucy was led into the hallways. Through a plastic quarantine barrier.

Men in similar hazmat suits wandered carefully. Lights flickered and dimmed all the way down. Another elevator and a new world greeted her. Dusky and rotten. Mold seemed to grow and float along the air. Sticky puckerings of flesh upon the walls that breathed.

Full of life. Obscenely dead. All at once.

She reeled closer to Martin. Clutched like a lost child. He'd still protect her from monsters bigger than him. For a while, Lucy believed nothing would scare her more. But, this place. This infection...

"It's alive." She shuddered, both hands on Brenner's arm.

"Very much so." He pulled her toward a room. "I want you to look at it."

Beyond that glass was a tear. Breathing and growling. A veil of sorts. Beckoning with rays of light.

Lucy let the lights fill her eyes.

"I want to get closer." She murmured. No longer afraid.

"Guide Lucy inside." Martin decided, eyes lingering as she went. No weapon or real armor. Sludge slicked under rubber boots. They closed Lucy into the room with the open wound.

"Lucy." Brenner's voice spoke over the com.

"I hear you." She trailed closer. Until the glow framed her body. One hand outstretched to the stringy pieces hanging in globs. It seemed to whisper at her. "What's inside?"

"We plan to find out."

"It wants to learn about us too." Lucy didn't blink. Barely breathed. A hand pulled for her zipper. Utterly alone, but maybe...just maybe something beyond the tear was looking back. "It wants to know everything. Every sense."

"Lucy..." Brenner called through. "Damn it, put your mask back on!"

She tore the white plastic and fabric away. Breathed deep to smell everything.

"It smells of every color." Lucy's bare hand touched the grime. Felt a chill in the lights. No warmth. A nothingness that still overstimulated. Her arms opened like she might be offering herself to it. Angelic and free. "It's all so hopeless."

"Bring her back in!" Brenner had barked, gesturing madly.

"It's beautiful." She gushed. Tearful. "It's so beautiful and dead." Hands lifted with little flurries of decay floating. Almost ethereal. Lucy breathed with the great unknown. Smelled the metallic technicolor. Hands pulled her back from it. "Hey! We were talking!" She kicked and felt something burn her throat.

Laughter.

It bubbled. Obscene.

Back in the command center, Brenner took her jaw. And all she could do was laugh in his face.

“Lucy, be quiet.” He asked. Collected. Teetering.

Mad siren. Harlequin. His greatest creation.

The hands slipped down her throat. Began to choke the glee from her veins.

“Sir.” An agent had offered. Men didn’t dare to stop him.

“Lucy, shut your fucking mouth!” Martin threw her back into the steel beams.

Slapped her so hard, every sense cut with a pulse of white light. He’d never hit her. Not in all their years of knowing each other. But, this day. This horrible day, Martin felt the frays building. Unraveling. Lucy finally pulled them free without remorse.

A mumble of a moan left her lips while she felt out as if she was trying to stand up. Whirling and dizzy.

“Keep watch.” Brenner swept an arm out to his men. “Connie will be in with further instructions.”

Dazed, Lucy touched her head. Felt blood trickle from swelling lips. Arms heaved her up until her spine curved. Martin dragged her out, heels skidding as she tried to follow. Back away from the decay. Into a room so he could tear off his protective suit. Lucy was still rubbing her head as he grasped her to leave.

“Now isn’t the time for you to be a brat.” Brenner pushed her through a door, out into a stairwell. Their bodies pressed flush. Lucy hissed. Tonguing her bloodied mouth. Chest heaving with no words. He got even closer to her, eyes bright. Half deranged. “You understand? We’ve opened a world. And chaos is bleeding. I will have order again. I’m in control. Hear me?”

“Yes, Martin.” She croaked. Lucy let him kiss her. Allowed him to

taste the blood on her lips. A knee pushed between her legs. Held her there. "You gonna fuck me over the stairs like you want to? Take me by force. Your lab whore."

He held her face and pulled back.

"Whore?" He bared his teeth. Towering. A couple strands of white hair fell into his face. "No, Lucy, we're equals. That place is you and it's me. A baby, yours and mine."

"Said that before. I made them cut me so you couldn't have one. Not mine."

"Life finds a way."

"I hope we both die in that place." Her head shook hopelessly. Voice airy and thick. "We deserve it."

He tried to chuckle.

"I'm sure. That wound. It's all of us. Your siblings. Dead or not. It's the breakthrough I've chased all my life. I'm the end for you, dear. You can be the Police Chief's slut all you please, but that's all you'll ever be to him."

"I'd rather be his slut." She agreed sweetly, licking her lips. "I'd rather die being his slut than be anything to you." Fingers smoothed his hair back into place.

Martin eyed the necklace under her open blouse. Touched the little teardrop with his finger. Smiled bright.

"The Chief is looking into this case. The missing boy. If he starts asking questions, our eyes will be on him." Martin turned to go up, snapping his fingers for Lucy to follow.

She didn't move beneath him.

"I will protect him from you. This place. No matter what becomes of me now." Lucy felt a ferocity fill her to the brim. "Jim and Will. Mia. Eleven. There were too many people I couldn't save, but I can save them."

"I don't doubt you'll try Lucy, your heart's been bleeding since you walked into my office."

"So has yours." She simmered. "I won't let you take him from me like you took so many others. Jim."

"I know that, dear. You're in love with him." Brenner turned on the steps. Seemed to process his own words. Cruel and twisted. Snarling with his fists tight. "Aren't you?"

"Yes." Lucy gasped instantly, too sweet and quiet. Free.

"Admit it!" Martin snapped.

"I just said, yes!" She cried that time, fierce as she could. Hands clenched.

Time stilled at such a revelation. Lucy felt an explosion of flower petals burst from her heart. Another gaping wound ripping open without remorse or fear.

And that was beautiful too.

"Then, it's in your best interest to keep him off the trail." He leaned over her. Shadow all consuming. Creeping over her eyes. A thumb caught her tear, swiping it aside.

Something softer quelled his voice. Like he might be telling her a bedtime story full of sugarplums.

"Could you ever have loved me truly?" He said. Softening. "You were supposed to love me."

"Yes," Lucy professed with the same ferocity, "that's the real tragedy. You're a man with flesh and bone. I think I do love you in a way. And I think I always will. A monstrous love. There was a time when we might have deserved each other. But, this love. It's the same way I'll always pity you. Will that ever be enough, Martin? My life. My body. My mind. My soul. Is it enough for you?"

Brenner sucked in some air. Pressed his lips into a tighter line. Eyes watering.

“No.” He decided. Affectionate. Doting. Caressing her cheekbone. “We’re the end of this, Lucy, and I won’t ever let you go.”

“Then, I will drown you.” She uttered. Just as lovely. Swaying into him, Lucy lifted her arms. Held him so tight. He might burst too. Martin hitched. Arms rising and falling. Unable to grasp back. “If not your whore or lover, what I am to you now? All these years.”

“My forever antagonist.” Martin cradled her face. Fond as can be. “A siren I pulled from the ocean. You’ll be so quiet when I let you go back. I may even join you.”

Lucy stepped from him. Stopped crying. Thought of all those who couldn’t wail. Who died of this illness and left the world in total silence.

“No,” she promised, “I’ll be screaming. If you loved me, you’d allow me that much.”

Lucy scoffed as he said nothing.

“I’ll have my answer. I’ll smell it on you... Those children better come out of this safe.” She reeled back, going down the steps instead to leave.

“You will come in on Thursday. Witness the breach with our team.” Brenner spoke, leaning over the rail. “You can play the friendly neighbor all you want until then. Do not make waves. And keep your eyes open. Watch for Eleven. Watch your dear Chief. Keep him out of trouble. We’ll be watching too.”

“Don’t move in on him. Jim has nothing to do with this.”

“Find the girl first and we won’t have to.” He paused. “I’ll send Mia your love.”

“Find Will Byers.” Lucy shot back. “Alive.” Clacking down the tile stairs to get away.

Away from that breach. Away from Martin Brenner and their monstrous love.

Away from the decay that smelled sweet and rotten all at once.

Away from the truths she still held behind her heart.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much for reading! I'm hoping this season comes together. Chat below or on my blog, Alias-B xoxo

17. We'll Always Have Hawkins

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone!! Season one is really picking up!!!
Lucy preparing for the worst. Jim's diving into the mystery. TW: Off screen death. Brenner as usual.
There's a slight threat of noncon. Tread carefully.

Lucy drove to Joyce's house first. Skidded over dirt and gravel, scrambled up to the door and knocked.

"Joyce?" Lucy hitched when it swung back. "Jonathan. Is your mother-?"

"Yeah, she's here..." He avoided her eyes. Shuffled his feet. Lucy's hand touched his shoulder.

"How are you?"

"I don't know, I guess... I just want to find my brother."

"Lucy." Joyce was a shaking wreck when she hurried to them. Jonathan slipped away quietly, upset and trying to hide it.

"Joyce, I'm so sorry." Hands lifted to steady the mother. "I just...wanted you to know we'll do everything to find Will. And I...I wish I could do more. I'll be in the search party tonight, but I wanted..."

Lucy grabbed a couple bills from her wallet.

"I figured you'd be making posters."

"Lucy, I can't...I can't take that."

"You can and will. To help find your boy." Lucy took Joyce's hand and put the money in it. Patted her friend's knuckles. Unable to look at her. "I'm so sorry."

She sniffed and turned to leave them alone.

“Lucy. Thank you.” Joyce followed her out to the porch. Watched a couple autumn leaves tumble.

“Don’t thank me.” Lucy insisted, hands shoved into her pockets. “We’re friends. I just wanted to see you and...if I can do anything. Please know I’m here for you.”

Joyce only nodded. Tearful. Clutching the cash to her chest. Lucy scrambled to get away. Back down the dirt road in her car.

She passed Benny's restaurant and slowed to see him taking some trash out back. A bright smile crossed his face while she waved and returned it. Felt a little easier to face the day after such encouragement.

Continuing onward.

Search parties combed the forests. Hiking over thrush until the sky dimmed. Lucy joined them in darkness. Pockets stuffed with candies and a water bottle.

“Will!” Echoes of the boy's name came from all directions with no shouts to return them.

“Feeling okay?” Jim found her among the groups. Lucy in a pair of jeans and sneakers. Hair pulled from her pretty face. Brown eyes that glowed in this moonlight. The Chief had his guys watching out for her too. Wasn’t safe to wander the forest with her illness while Hawkins fractured.

“Fine.” Lips twitched. A chill ran through her jacket. Flashlight trembling as she cracked branches under her feet. Jim lumbered in his big, blue coat. All she wanted was to curl up with him somewhere away from here. A place the world wasn’t falling to pieces.

Jim stared ahead. For the first time in a while, she really took in his profile. Square and scruff. Intent. Fiercer than he was when he woke this morning because a mission bloomed. Lucy inhaled the fresh night air. Listened to the wind whistle. Volunteers calling out a harmony.

It was such a strange thing to love someone.

Only because Lucy felt it changed nothing about her.

She'd always loved Jim Hopper.

Loving him was always a normal part of her routine.

Jim turned to eye her so she snapped aside. Hoped the dark covered her blush heating.

It was an inopportune time to fall in love too. Her world was ugly. Secretive. Half formed. She'd been made and unmade then made again into a perfect femme fatale. Unworthy to be loved in return.

"Will Byers!" Lucy called. Voice thickening. A breath sucked in through her teeth. Jim stayed closer. Watched her move around branches and leaves. Alert and wide awake. Sucking strawberry candies ever so often.

"He's a good student." A skinny man came to Jim's side as Lucy pressed on ahead.

"What?" Jim seemed to snap out of his trance.

"Will. He's a good student." Scott Clarke. The coolest teacher currently at Hawkins Middle School. Lucy peered to see them chat about science and climbed over a fallen tree to shift down a little hill.

It felt hopeless. Whatever was longing behind that open wound knew where Will Byers was.

"Sara. My daughter..." Jim's words stopped Lucy in her tracks. He kept his eyes ahead and ducked under branches. Flashlight lifting. "Galaxies, the universe, whatnot... She always understood all that stuff."

Lucy tried to get her feet moving. Listened to owls up in the trees echoing little calls too. Like they might be trying to find Will with them.

"I always figured there was enough going on down here, I never needed to look elsewhere."

"Your daughter, what grade is she?" Scott replied. "Maybe I'll get her in my class."

"No." Jim's steps picked up. Voice leveling. "She, uh, she lives with her mom in the city."

Longer strides got him away from the group there.

"Thanks for coming out, teach. We really appreciate it." Jim even passed Lucy on the way. Stepping over rocks and dirt, veering away on his own. She watched his silhouette against the blue sky. Stars twinkling kinder. Wondered about his deepest thoughts. Steps hurried beyond a few volunteers to catch up with him.

A shot fired distantly. Maybe she imagined that.

Thunder crackled next. Every volunteer stopped to hear it. Lucy bumped into Jim and almost toppled over grasping his arm. He seemed paler even in the blackness when he peered down at her.

"Hey." She let a breath go. Couple rain drops touched her hair and cheeks.

"Shit." Jim winced at the charge of light across the sky. The rain began to beat. "Might have to pull this one back. Lucy stood there and looked up to see the rain fall. Washing her skin clean. So she hoped. Felt like nothing would be enough. "Stay right here."

Jim left her to cross to one of his officers. Spoke over the storm and pointed to send him off.

"C'mon." He was back and tugging at Lucy's arm. "You shouldn't be in this. Next shift is picking up, might have to stay in their cars either way with this storm."

Lucy eyed his hand and slowly shifted to take it in her own. Laced their fingers and liked how it felt. Jim let her, pulling through mud and rain.

"You drive here?" He turned to see her. Lucy shook her head.

"Got dropped off."

“Let’s get you home safe. I need to speak with Flo again, make sure we can ride this out.” Jim opened the door and pushed Lucy up into the car. Turned the heat on when he got in to speed off. Shut the music low so he could hear his guys chatter through the radio.

“Jim.” Lucy searched. Sounded devoid. “Something awful happened.”

“Lucy, you can’t-” Jim licked his lips, fatigued. Already lax from his pills. “Can’t get like that. We’ll find him. I’ll find him.”

“You ever think bad things are gonna happen to you and all you can do is wait?” Lucy paused to tremor. “You can’t stop it. And this...front you put up is just crumbling because it was made of god damn porcelain the entire time. Jim, I’m not...I’m not this.”

This slow moving starlet with eloquent turns of phrase who can wear high heels and play like one of the guys. This girl with charm and garters whose biggest fear is getting kicked from the stage if her lines aren’t perfect. No illness in sight, they painted that and blared stage light so no one would see her ache. Dancing so hard, her feet bled into expensive heels. But, black and white flicks never showed that and she never complained. Just danced on.

“Lucy...” Jim said too slow. Too careful.

“I...I don’t know what I’m saying, I’m,” she rubbed her eyes pink, “I’m sorry. I...”

“Hey,” Jim paused to swerve into her driveway and cut the engine, “this stuff doesn’t happen in Hawkins. It’s sending everyone’s emotions through the roof.” He’d explained just as gentle and steady. One hand lifted to touch her shoulder. “We’re all doing everything we can. The best thing you can do is take care of yourself. Get some sleep. Don’t push. We’ll find him.”

“I just know there’s more I could have done.”

About all of it and that was crippling her all over again.

“Lucy.” Jim touched her chin. Beyond sweet. “I need you to listen, I’m going to tell you something. Are you ready to listen?”

He didn't say it like he knew best. Didn't assert her like Brenner would have or make her feel like a stupid little girl. Lucy welled, lips shaky and pressing up as if she might be trying to smile.

"Do you think I'm crazy, Jim?"

His thumb drew a circle into her jawline. Blue eyes searching for something more. Something to piece together all these truths Lucy Garland hid behind flashing lights. Posed herself high above the world upon marble pedestals in twisting silk drapery. Immortalized forever.

"No." His head shook to assert that much. "I think you find it easy to blame yourself when pain is too great, I think you punish yourself. Hurt yourself. For what happened so long ago. But, you're going to stop. Yeah? It's in the past. It's gone and it's not going to touch you."

Jim Hopper and his hero complex. Always so ready to take a glinting blade before anyone else. A preference for licking other wounds before his own no matter how fiercely they bled.

"Lucy. It's an emotional time and hurting yourself isn't how you're going to get through it." Jim brought his hand down but she grabbed it. Pressed silent kisses into his fingertips. Down the palm and wrist. Even kissed the blue band there. Pushed his hand back into her cheek while brown eyes shut tight.

"You give good advice, James Hopper, you should take it once in a while." Lucy tried again to smile for him. Succeeded. Met those stormy eyes. Her Jim. Telling her she must stop hurting herself because she needs to hear the words aloud.

She pictured them dancing black and white in an old Hollywood dream. Matching smiles. Utter twinkling perfection.

"I'm glad you think so," he beamed some, "Lucretia."

The summer was easier. Hawkins was boring and silent. Balmy, endless days where Lucy could visit him at the station. Sit upon his desk and smile and chatter endlessly because she was happy. Open. Delusional and free. For a little while. Spend nights in his trailer.

Make it a cozy, safe place and watch the water dance greens and blues outside the window. It felt so far away.

All she ever wanted.

That stark blare was behind her eyes now. Those empty lights glistening. Reminding her that she'd kept the truth from him.

A drop in an eternal stream that only glowed brighter.

Washing out all she ever wanted.

Brenner would come for her soon and she would match him. That wound will bleed across this little, foolish town.

Jim would discover that she's a siren sent from hell with a red smile who longed for the sweet smell of tasty fear. He's peel her skin back to see the mutilation.

The real Lucy Garland. Who made too many corrosive choices that scarred her soul. And equally horrible, Lucy could pull threads of other souls apart without remorse. That wasn't something you could ever kiss better.

And what killed her most.

She couldn't confess to Jim now how profound it ached to lose all she ever wanted.

He was home. A heart with four walls to protect. It wasn't fair that all she could ask was *why* when good came into her life.

Lucy inhaled hot cinnamon. Bubbling all around them. Leaned forward to kiss Jim's lips as tender as she could. Even lifted his hat to press her mouth into his temple. Caressed his cheek and slipped away after placing his hat back down.

"This town. It wasn't so bad when it was quiet." She mused, opening the door. Jim twitched a smirk to agree. Nodded. "You're still my best friend, right?"

"Yeah and I don't plan to let anyone take that spot." He touched

her hand. Let her slip out. "We'll always have that, Lucy."

Saw her turn without those artificial flashes for once.

"And we'll always have Hawkins, Jim."

Lucy batted her lashes. So full and fond. Dreamed deeply out into the rain. Bathed in the crisp air on the way to her door. Jim waited until she got inside. Lit up a cigarette.

Drove off into that night.

** ** *

Amazing how loudly the morning birds could sing even after a storm. As if it never happened. Lucy washed herself cool and clean. Dress and perfume. Insulin shot. Avoided the phone and mirrors to do her routine until something close to perfection swept her in silk.

Blissful and unaware as the doorbell rang.

"Martin." He stood there and looked like the world wasn't closing in. Not a care in sight. He seemed to be waiting for a reaction and none came.

Oh. She didn't know yet.

That dropped his shoulders.

"You said I would come in on Thursday. Did something happen?"

"Nothing that can be helped. The girl can't have gone far. We had a lead. And the opening remains quiet." Martin turned on his expensive heel. "Come with me."

"Why?"

"Because we won't get the chance again." Brenner gestured to his car. Lucy stood there in the autumn wind before shuffling to put some heels on. Forgot her coat and wandered out. "Have you eaten?"

"No." She looked down the empty street. Benny's truck was gone

from the driveway. Strange because it was too early for him. “Martin. What are you doing?”

“Can’t we go somewhere, Lucy, for a little while?” He turned to see her. White hair shifting. “A better place. Somewhere that’s green.” Full of life and sparkling emeralds.

“I’m not sure anymore.”

“Get in, we owe it to ourselves to try.” Brenner started his engine as she slid into the passenger seat. *Ave Maria* played on the radio. Crystal clear. Lucy sighed into the fresh air. Watched the trees pass. Martin seemed to be tied up with his thoughts. Tension sprang and no words followed.

He drove her out of Hawkins. Thirty minutes to a gleaming, ritzy neighborhood where the houses were all separated by gates and massive decorated lawns. Perfectly trimmed hedges and ornate fountains. Oh so artificial.

“Where are we?”

“My place.” Brenner got out and climbed the steps. Lucy surveyed the mansion. Too large for one inquisitive man. “Come inside.” A hand reached out toward her. Lucy stared at it. Tried to breathe. Reached and slid her fingers against his skin. “It’s cold this morning.”

“I don’t mind it.” Lucy stepped over a Persian rug going inside. Sleek cherry wood and decorated red carpets. A place she might have dreamed of as a teenager. Opulent like a French opera house or a museum. Even smelled clean.

Brenner crossed to adjust the heat slightly. She just looked. Hands pulled in as if she was a messy child in a china shop. Items that were worth more than her whole life. All behind glass. Even the paintings so they could remain untouched. Statues of twisted bodies. Mostly women escaping their fate. Weaponry like crossbows and decorated blades from a variety of cultures.

Years of history he kept to himself.

It felt like a Pharaoh's tomb. All the pretty things Martin Brenner

collected to be buried with. Another chill rushed Lucy's spine when she caught him looking at her face. Eyes turned to her green twill dress. Simple and fitted.

"Why am I here?" Lucy trembled at the center of the hallway. Followed the twist of the room. Spiral staircase and stained glass. Breathtaking.

"To eat a meal with me. That's all I ask." He went into the next room and returned with a garment bag. "We'll do this right. Go and change. Leave your clothing on the sofa."

"You want to play house for a day while the world falls to ruin?" She came to him near the steps. Eyes welling. Brenner's head tilted.

"More than anything. Just one moment, Lucy."

"I gave you my mind blindly. I gave you my life." Her intent voice rose and all he did was listen well. "I've given you every day!"

Lucy shuddered.

"And I left so few hours for myself." She choked. "Do you understand that? Do you even care?"

"You didn't trust me for a moment of it, dear. I told you I let you lie because you did it so sweetly. In here, there's no deception. Scream and sing all you please. I'm listening." Brenner came to her. "We've done this dance so many days. Sometimes I long to count them. I like to think there was one day our love overlapped. Just one. Let's make this day in that image."

He pushed the garment bag into her arms.

"Get comfortable. The kitchen is through the right door...here. Pass the dining room and meet me when you're ready."

"Why are you doing this?" Lucy squeezed the hanger to herself.

"I'll pour you a drink too." Martin seemed to not be listening, pulling his own long coat off to show the blue suit underneath. He left her there alone.

She could have run.

Lucy thought about that first day in his office. She could have run at that time too and didn't. Air pulled before steps crossed to the next room. A sitting room for entertaining. Looked so unused. Lucy hung the bag on a coat hanger and peeled her dress off. Jewelry too.

Another white dress greeted her eyes. Not too unlike the one Martin had gotten her to murder Barker in. So many years ago.

This one showed more. A slit almost to her hip. Bell sleeves that barely fell from her shoulders. Tight corset like bodice and frills. A jeweled necklace of opulent diamonds and earrings to match. Lucy shook her hair out. Shiny locks that fell closer to her shoulders. Wandered out into the light looking like a goddess. His leading lady.

She crossed beyond a dining room with two plate settings. Smelled food cooking.

"Bravissima." Martin looked up. Sleeves rolled to his elbows. Tie tucked into his shirt to keep it safe. A record player trilled with some instrumental in another room. Lucy didn't know what to say. He could just be playing as usual game. Testing what he could make her do.

A ball of fluff hopped onto the counter behind him. White Persian cat with huge blue eyes. Licking its chops. Ugly fucker.

"Never knew you had a pet."

"Ah. This thing roamed the grounds. Kept the mice away and I let it inside after a season of feeding it. Followed me when I returned home. I never named him."

Lucy was always learning new things about Martin Brenner. Peculiar things. He clicked his tongue so the nameless cat went to his food dish.

"Go, sit down at the table." Martin was looking at her dress. Lucy mechanically turned and went in. Fine china lined the walls. Things he collected for the sake of collecting. Just because he could and wanted them all behind glass. Lucy pushed her chair in. Felt the

weight of this necklace pulling her down. Thought she might have a panic attack.

“Strawberry crepes. Made from scratch.” The plates were set down. Masterfully crafted. “Champagne too.” Two glasses bubbled when he poured. Seated a ways across from her at the other end.

Lucy stared down at her plate. Reluctant.

“Do you think I’d ever poison you?” Martin was digging in already. Totally relaxed and comfortable. Sinking into his chair.

“I think you manipulated my disease to keep me docile. That counts.” Lucy’s eyes lifted. Face a painted porcelain mask. “True or false? You’ve known my dose has always been too high. They play like they’re adjusting it. Brand and amount. But, it’s all the same.”

“How long did that take to figure?” Martin reached to sip. Lucy sighed, picking up a fork. Cut little bites.

“Longer than it should have.” Lips lifted and Lucy ate. “This is delicious. I love strawberries.”

“I know, they’re your favorite. That’s why I picked it.” Martin gestured with his glass so she drank the bubbly too. His oddball cat came out. Swept idly against Lucy’s legs and went to wander the palace. Light streamed into the stained glass above. Made this whole place ethereal.

They shared a peaceful meal. Martin whisked her into another room. Musical artifacts and maps upon the walls. A gold telescope at the window. Fingers settled the needle upon another record player. Let the tune unfurl and turned to see her

“I can’t dance.”

“Of course you can, we’re in another place.”

All sugar plums. Anything is possible.

Brown eyes drew to the pretty music box she’d given him. Nestled on its own mahogany perch. A shrine.

Lucy took his hand without shuddering. Felt the notes sparkle with god rays streaming into the room. Turned with him and was pricked with an emotional swell.

Gave into the scent of *Colonia*. Pressed and settled her head upon his chest. Pretended that maybe the world wasn't all crumbling. Maybe there was a chance for them once to be well.

Lucy tried to be strong and pretend he couldn't nurture her. Pretend he wasn't so ingrained into her existence that there would always be a tether between them. They made something together, evil or not. And the truth is it would always matter deep down.

"I can't breathe." Lucy pulled after a moment, near tears. Touched a hand to her face as she leaned back to see the painted ceiling. Gold paint and almost moving in the daylight. Martin's lips found her head. It burned. She yanked off, took a few steps. "I can't. I can't just..."

Frantic hands wiped tears away. This chilling expression crossed his face before he grabbed her arms. Forced their lips together. Hoped she'd feel it too. Lucy resisted, crying into it. Silently. Unable to stop the flow.

They struggled back into the couch. Martin kissing her lips and cheeks. Tasting the salt of her tears. Muffling her with his mouth so he didn't have to hear it. Body pushing into her own. Trying to touch her still.

"Get off me-" Lucy gasped into his mouth. He hushed her so she shrilled. "I said, get off me!"

She slapped him. Scathing and direct across the face until he reeled back. Lucy held herself. Waited to be punished when he grabbed her again and ripped her to her feet. Cringing.

Brenner let her go and stepped back. Chest sinking. Almost in disbelief with himself even.

"We can stop." He said that as if he understood the magnitude of it. As if he might be telling himself too.

Lucy Garland snapped apart.

"My crying and struggling didn't hint that, I had to hit you."

"You crawled to me, Lucy. From the first."

"Because you fucked me up! I'm terrified of you! Don't you see that?"

His head shook so she exploded. Wide eyed and fully present. Fingers became talons.

"I've seen this movie, Martin, with the man full of mystery and depths who terrorized the object of his affection. He does not win her. That's the point. This collection and talent, he wasted it. Cruelty and possessing pretty, powerful things just because he wants this and that. He finds out he's not the hero, *that* is the point." Lucy shook her head. Billowing somehow with a quiet intensity.

"She never forgets him." Brenner just stood there. Let her fill the room.

"But, he hurts her and isolates her until he is all she sees and when the last act comes, she *resents* him. She remembers him because he scars her! Is that what you want for me, too? Clip my claws so I spend the rest of my days in pain and hating you. I won't stop fighting. Never!"

No answer.

"And the leading lady. She's afraid because there is a difference in being indispensable to someone and being the center of their world. I never asked to be your still point! We're not prizes to be won to stroke your fragile egos. You had my body, my flesh, but my heart and soul...they'll never be apart of your collection. Ever!"

Lucy crumbled, but went on. Powerful as can be in ferocity.

"Men do this, they put all their trauma and shit onto a woman thinking she's his mother. His wife. His sister. His whore. His fucking therapist and not a human with her own shit to deal with! You're so fucking entitled!"

She swept an arm out toward him. Spitting venom.

"And then you blame her when she cannot save you! When she lashes or when she's manic. You lose your mind because she's not perfect, not made for you. Not made of you because you really think Eve was made from the rib of Adam. It's bullshit, Martin!"

"But, I do love you." He had tried. Lucy shook her head again. Tears fell as she swallowed thickly to explain.

"And I will never be enough," she picked up the dress and came to him, "don't you see that?" Lucy broke open without remorse. "You can't- *won't* -rest until I'm bled dry. That's not love. I cannot teach you to love properly and you resent me for that! You see me for everything that I lack because you couldn't remake me in your image."

And Jim Hopper never once saw Lucy Garland as lacking or incomplete.

That's why she loved him so.

"I want to go home." Lucy said, faltering. Martin came to her. Cupped those damp cheeks. She waited for a kiss that never came.

"Very well." He sighed. Looked lost as he wiped those tears away. Illusions shattered. "Dry your eyes and change." Lucy was in such a hurry, she undressed in front of him. Pulled the necklace off to offer it. Blue eyes stilled to see her fist quake. "Are you really that afraid of me?"

"You hurt people."

"Yes," he paused, "and people hurt me."

"You became them. Life doesn't always make up for life. I know that well enough." Lucy dropped the jewelry into his palm. "Please, just take me home. You're not alone, Martin, I can give you that. But, that's all. I have nothing else for you. I hope you believe I'm still sorry."

Martin did something peculiar. Bowed his head low and took her

hand to kiss the knuckle.

The most genuine display of regret he'd ever shed.

Lucy almost shattered. Almost.

"I'll take you home now."

And he did without another word.

** ** *

Often, Lucy loathed this house. Unmade and gift wrapped again like she was. Covered in decorative mirrors instead of family photos. Brenner wanted Lucy to see herself. Watch the full evolution. An evening shot came when the sun began to fall.

She was still massaging the skin as a bell tolled. Louder than usual. Too depressed after Brenner's prodding to venture out, Lucy owed it to Will Byers to keep up with the search parties. A hand pulled the door open.

"Jim?" She blinked at his expression. Grave. Metal wafted towards her underlined with a fleshy rot. "I was just going to eat something and drive out to join the... What happened?"

Her eyes shimmered as he pulled his hat off. Eyes lowering.

"Can I come in?" Jim was yanked into the house. A hand lifted to rub his unshaven jaw.

"Jim...talk to me." Lucy searched to find his eyes.

"Wanted to tell you in person before word got around." He swallowed. Lips pressing. "It's Benny."

"Benny?"

"Got a call and found him, he's..." Jim's mouth shut. Throat cleared. "He's-"

"Don't..." A cry lifted and Lucy settled her hands on his chest

because there wasn't a table in front of her. "I talked to Benny yesterday. I saw him today even. He was fine."

"Lucy, he's dead. Shot himself."

"No, Jim!" She pressed her teeth, head shaking. Unable to think of an excuse. "He's fine. He's going camping with Earl and them. He...He was fine. I felt it. He was fine."

"Luce, whoa, whoa."

"Can you just...excuse me a moment? Please." She drew those shaken fists into herself. Wiped her eyes before tears could fall. Jim looked confused as she pushed him back outside.

Benny killing himself. As strange a thing as Will Byers running away.

He saw something he shouldn't have. And Martin wanted one last day with her before it all came crashing.

Lucy shut the door on Jim and plucked up a fire poker. Hurtled a scream and smashed the biggest mirror over the mantle. Instantly her door was bashed back open. She broke four more mirrors and three vases before Jim was wrestling her back. Shouting something that didn't register.

Shards covered the floor, reflected her absolute fury. Twisting and crying so hard. Hair flying all directions.

Those contorting women she saw in paintings and in marble near ready to burst into flames.

Or push daggers through their hearts.

Unhinged from a world that never deserved them.

She dropped the iron and kicked up in Jim's grip. They fell back into the stairs. Lucy's arms were trapped so she couldn't beat on anything else.

"Hey, hey, I got you. Stay right here with me, I got you. I'm here."

Jim's eyes were glossy as he managed to turn her around and take her jaw. "I know. I know." He kept saying that.

Benny was his friend too.

Lucy tried to settle. Leaned in to touch their foreheads. Noses brushing.

"Gonna take you to my place to rest." Jim's thumbs drew barely there circles while she grasped for his wrists. "Pack a bag."

Lucy opened her eyes to see him. Knew he didn't want her to be alone. But, she wondered if maybe he didn't want to be alone either.

"Have you eaten?"

"No, I took my shot."

"Then you need to soon. We'll grab you something. Get upstairs, pack a bag." Jim was pulling her back to her feet. Patting her bottom to make her go. Lucy stumbled up and left him there to look at all the shards of mirror. No telling how many years of bad luck it meant.

It was strange to see a starlet in such a state of rage.

She shoved items into a bag. Rubbed her eyes and looked around. Aimless. Jim already had her lunchbox with insulin set on the counter. The vials at his place were likely empty.

"We'll clean this mess up later. Lucy," Jim had her by the hand, "let's go." She started crying again when they got outside. Saw Benny's car still not in the driveway. Hopper had to buckle her into his Blazer. Hands were on her face again as he leaned in to steady her.

"Hey, you gotta breath even. Slow. Slow." Jim coached her through it. Pushed Lucy's palm into his chest so she could mirror it. Once, she was steady, he got in next. The engine started so they could go. Air conditioning turned up. Dried Lucy's face.

She leaned toward the window. Saw herself running down that street from bullies into Benny Hammond's arms. Still fighting.

Fucking Sugar Baby. Lucretia. Her chest sunk.

Jim was talking in soothing tones. Not betraying his own obvious grief. All he wanted was to keep stuffing pills, but Lucy needed him. Joyce needed him. Will Byers needed him. Hawkins fucking needed him.

He tried not to resent that. Jim returned to a place that didn't need him on purpose. Being needed was too heavy to bear since he failed Sara.

"Earl said some kid snuck into Benny's kitchen to steal food, it might be Will and it...I don't know. I don't."

"Kid." Lucy's neck turned, lips parting before they shut. All she smelt was grief and shame. Guilt. "You know this isn't your fault, right?"

Jim's fingers flexed uncomfortably on the wheel.

"Why do you say that?"

"I just...thought maybe you needed to hear it." She peered aside. Out at the fall trees screaming and dying in the wind. "Kid..."

Eleven.

If a scared girl stumbled into Benny's place. He certainly would have tried to help her.

Maybe made a phone call that was tapped into because Lucy knew Hawkins Lab watched everything. Her lips trembled. She knew that lab more than she liked. They might have even sent her out to murder her beloved friend. Easily. Brenner had agents and Connie was his right hand. She played a role well and blended in being a woman.

Fists curled.

Jim was still talking when he pulled up to his trailer.

"I'm going to make you something to eat and get you into bed.

Then, I have to help out for a few more hours. We covered a lot of ground today.”

“I can go.”

“I know, but I want you to rest, alright?” Jim ached for a pill. Caved in and took one. “One of us has to rest.”

Lucy let him take her into his trailer. Jim moved around the kitchen, quickly put a ham and cheese sandwich together. Even cut it diagonally. Sara used to say that made it taste better. Came to the couch and settled it down.

“Eat something and get into bed.” He paused and slowly sat down as she stared at the plate.

“Benny liked me.” She spoke. “I mean, he really liked me. Took care of me, but I knew he felt...” Her eyes turned to narrow. “I always wondered why he never made a move. Who knows, I might have...”

“He did like you.” Jim could only nod. “Made sure all the boys knew.”

“Yes, but he knew I liked you and you liked me. That’s why he never tried. Because he was a good man and a good friend.” Lucy had to squeak the last couple syllables. Jim cleared his throat, eyes down before he nodded once more. She lifted the food to take a bite. “Thank you, Jim.”

“Rest.” He kissed her temple and got up to trudge back out into the world.

Lucy managed to eat most of the sandwich, plucking bits of crust off. She washed the plate and undressed. Stole one of Jim’s dark blue thermal shirts. Tried to get into bed and immerse in his scent. Tossing and turning for a couple hours until it was pitch black outside.

A huff followed before she rose and opened the door attached to his bedroom. Wandered out onto the deck to see the dark water glimmer. Moonlight danced.

That's where Jim found her upon returning. Door open. Legs curled up into herself. A tiny ball sitting on one of his lawn chairs. Without words, Jim pulled his thick jacket off and draped it over the front of her.

"Thank you."

"Couldn't sleep?" He came to the wood railing to light a cigarette. Shirt opened. Hat off.

"Tried." Lucy pulled his jacket up. "Anything?"

"Something. I don't know yet." He turned to see her. Puffed smoke. "Found this fabric. Like a...a hospital gown scrap in a pipe. Near Hawkins Lab. Earl said the kid in Benny's kitchen had a hospital gown on. Something doesn't..."

Lucy's head snapped up. Eyes huge. Paling.

"Hawkins Lab."

"Yeah," Jim moved back to lean on the wood, ashes flicked, "going up there with the guys tomorrow. Check it off the box."

"Why would Hawkins Lab-?"

"I don't know, that's why I got this funny feeling." He turned because she was on her feet suddenly standing next to him. Coat left over the chair. "It's cold. You should get back inside."

Lucy slid her arms under his. Pulled his warmth against her skin. Tucked into Jim's body.

"Only if you're with me."

Jim took the offer. Dropped his cigarette and skimmed cool fingers under the hem of the stolen shirt falling from her shoulder. Lucy guided one hand up to cup her breast. Trembled to sigh as he toyed with her hard nipple. A cold breath puffed. Lucy was jumping up into his arms, letting him carry her back in after grabbing his coat to kick the door shut.

The shirt pulled over her head. Jim got his mouth on her chest after settling her on the dresser. Lucy's frantic hands opened buttons. Yanked his shirt away and went for the pants next.

"I can't wait." She whined, stroking him. Bringing his mouth back up for a kiss. They scrambled, knocking bottles, old cans, and clothing into the floor. Jim buried himself. Pulled her closer to press his face into her neck. Fingers tangled hair. The dresser started to rhythmically knock back into the wall. Two souls clung together. Desperately.

"Fuck, Jim," she arched, "you feel so good inside me."

"Yeah?" He teased his scruff up her throat. Let her legs curl around his hips. "Like when I fuck you this way?"

"I'd let you fuck me anyway." She closed her eyes to let the euphoria of him swelter. Fingers dug into her hips, forcing her to meet his hard thrusts.

"Look at me." He kissed her, met her eyes when they came out. "Yeah?"

"No one's ever felt this good." Gasps filtered out as she kissed his jaw, lips touched his ear. A breathless moan underscored his slight chuckle. Lucy's fingernails dug into skin.

She kept telling him how good he was fucking her. Just like that. Walls rattled. Lucy smelt his wash and was overcome with a pour of cinnamon. Harder and harder to ignore.

Elsewhere, Martin Brenner threw a headset clear across the room. Every person seated at their station made it a point to look away while he stomped out.

Jim and Lucy fell back into the bed spent moments later. Still intertwined. She rolled off him. Purred. Jim got up and watched the release slip out of her. Fuck.

Lucy ran a hand up his chest. Felt the heart thump. Let him pull the covers up to keep the chill out. Cocooned in heat. Jim settled one arm behind his head and swept Lucy into his body with the other. A

sigh as she played with his chest hair.

“You ever feel cursed?” Eyes went to the ceiling. Lingered while she looked at him and settled her head down. Felt the heart under his ribs pumping still.

“Every day.” Lips mused against his skin.

“The last person to go missing here was in, uh, the summer of ‘23.” He cleared his throat. Found a breath. “The last suicide was-”

“Fall of ‘61.” Lucy pushed up to see him. Jim with hard intent eyes, panning to focus on her there. “You didn’t bring this here, Jim, this...rot.”

He blinked, fingers shifting to tuck hair behind her ear. Lucy exhaled and pressed into his touch. Pulled to keep his palm on her jaw.

“It was already here festering. It’s just decided now to lash back. I know what that’s like. You’re not the person making it worse, you’re the person doing everything to stop it. You still know how to give back to the world. Sometimes, I think you give too much, but you’re too good. You’ll never see it that way.”

Lucy drew forward. Slid her arms under his to press her head into his neck.

“What are you doing?”

“Holding you.” She said. “Because I think you need to be held right now. Think you’re too scared to just ask, Jim, you always need to be strong enough for everyone else. But, not right now. It’s okay.”

Maybe there was something beautiful to her ability. Being in tune with emotions. Knowing what people were feeling. What they needed.

Jim hitched this breath as if he might laugh, but it came out shaky.

Sensations exploded like felt flower petals falling all around them. Cinnamon. Warm and brewing to spill over the bed. Lucy held him

tighter without words. Didn't even stop as he sniffled and tried to hide that. Fingers rubbed his watering eyes. They intertwined totally. Completely. Gleaming in the moonlight, they held that beautiful silence close.

Made it a home.

All they ever wanted.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank all!!!! Heavier chapter for sure. Chat with me below about the fic or visit my tumblr, Alias-b !!!

18. Thermodynamic Miracles

Notes for the Chapter:

:) Thanks for following this fic. The mystery continues for Jim. Lucy comes face to face with the monster. Brenner contemplates the end.

Lucy got a surprise that next day. A phone call.

“What do you think you’re doing out there? Letting this happen.” Mia’s tone. Stern like their mother. Lucy trembled at Martin across the way. Patiently watching her from a chair. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“I couldn’t talk him out of it.” Lucy spoke after a moment.

“Jim came here. He...He almost saw me.” Mia paused. “He’s putting himself in danger.”

“He’s just trying to find Will. I assume the Lab was prepared. They always are.” Lucy met Brenner’s eyes. Mia paused to speak in the background.

“I have to go. Keep Hopper out of this...” Her voice changed. Mia became a sister again. But, briefly. “He looked good, you know. Taller.”

“Yeah, he’s...trying his best out here.” Lucy bit her lip and twisted the phone cord. “I love you.”

Click.

The phone clanked down.

“I don’t know what you want from me today.” Lucy crossed back and Martin stood.

“I want you to visit the Chief and run interference.”

“Spy.” Came the correction.

“Suck his cock for all I care, just find out what he knows.” Brenner looked like he’d gotten minutes of sleep. Bumping into her on the way out.

“I just might.” Lucy turned to see his expression flare. The moment passed and his voice dropped dangerously.

“And don’t lie to me.”

“If I do, I’ll do it politely.” She went to see him out. “As always.”

The door smacked on him.

Lucy fluffed her hair and snatched her purse to go out. Shrugged a coat on. Her car revved. Made it to the station in record time. Fliers of Will Byers hung up all around. Smiling and carefree. A few blew into the breeze like fluttering leaves.

Tired hands rubbed her face and went inside. Jim’s Blazer was parked and she found him in the bullpen bent over a desk talking quickly with Callahan and Powell. Phil perked when Jim gave him a task and passed Lucy, hat tipping so she smiled.

“You have a minute, Chief?” She peered at Flo stacking files and maps. Plotting the next search parties.

“Wait for me outside. Five minutes.” He stood taller so Powell went too. “Lucy.” Jim cocked his head, placed his hat on and marched her out back. “I don’t have long.”

“You find something?”

“Might have a lead.” He dug around his pockets so Lucy offered a lighter. His guard lowered. “Something funny.”

Skinny arms crossed to hold her coat closer.

“What’s that?”

“Hawkins Lab.” Jim lit a cigarette. “They know something. I don’t know what though.”

“After one visit.”

“Yeah. They lied to my face. I’m gonna find out why.” He puffed, peering at her face against the fall trees. Leaves tumbling to swirl. “I saw this woman there. Barely a glance, she looked like...”

“Who?”

“Ah, no one.” Jim rubbed his eyes. Dropped it. “I don’t know what I think yet. But, it’s something.” He flicked the ashes. “Say, why’d you come here?”

“I just wanted to see you for a moment. Give you a little ease if I can.” Lucy closed the distance. Cupped the back of his neck to bring that mouth down. Not bothered by cigarette smoke and coffee. Jim’s lips twitched. He stepped on his smoke and pecked her mouth again. Fingers scratched his scruff. Bodies swaying closer. “Where are you going?”

“Library. Just...get some history.”

“How’s that gonna help you find Will?”

“I was gone a long time, Lucy.” He let her slip down. Eyes flickering. “Figure I should go back to the start. See if I missed something.”

Jim caught Lucy's fists clenching in response.

** ** *

“You’ve nothing to worry about. He just wants to find Will. It’s obvious he’s not in that lab.” Lucy looked around. Shut into a cramped payphone minutes later.

“Are you holding out on me? You know what happens when we get nervous.” Martin had hinted. Her teeth set.

“Just don’t be sloppy. Jim’s not an idiot. But, he has his vices. Will’s not in Hawkins Lab...but he’s not in Hawkins either. Is he?”

“Meaning?”

"You know exactly what I mean."

"Say it then." He got terse.

"That place. You and I both know he's inside."

"Then he is lost."

"I don't think that's true." Lucy watched the cars pass, head shaking.

"We'll find out tomorrow." Martin decided. "Anything else?"

"He didn't give me much, he's tired. I'm sure that benefits you."

"Us. Lucy. It benefits us. You're one of us." That crisp and clear voice undoing her stitches. "You always will be. I wonder what your Chief would think."

Lucy trembled visibly. Leveled herself.

"If this hadn't happened, what would have become of me?" Lucy changed the subject. "I think about that a lot. The long haul. Your plans for me. The Siren. Subject Zero. The first budding horror to touch the Earth."

"Would you like to know?"

"I already do. Loose ends. A grander scale because those frays will all unravel." She replied evenly, eyes closing. Not mourning. "All those enemy labs. Wiped out when I strut in wearing some expensive outfit you picked."

"Killing and controlling the masses. When this ends, it's still a twinkle in our eye. You'll be the most important piece of our history, Lucy. You should feel honored." He spoke so fondly of the end of the world.

"I'm your atomic bomb, Martin," she shuddered there, "and my doomsday clock is ticking down to midnight. Where will you be when the end comes for us?"

Lucy heard him inhale as if to reply. Clicked the phone down. Breathed there before she tried to vacate. Back to her car.

She passed Benny's place. Covered in strips of yellow tape. Fingers paled on the wheel.

It was a hard thing to stomach. The fact that Benny Hammond's sweet smiles were lost to this world. Gone like fall leaves swaying far asunder.

Taking Will Byers too would have gutted this small town.

** ** *

Truth is one phone call can change how the world spins.

Lucy wished she could delete Martin's tone. So assured and blase as he reminisced about a tragedy late that night. Same collected tone he used when they spoke of Lucretia's epic death so many years ago.

But, that was ancient history and what was happening now connected all of them.

"It's unfortunate. The boy was just a clumsy child..."

Lucy was gripping the phone. Fading in and out.

"...fell in..."

Martin rambled for ten minutes spinning his tale. A spider's web.

"...nothing else to be said, I-"

"Martin, darling?" Lucy cut in. Cool as the ocean was chilled.

"Yes, Lucy?"

"Blow it up your ass."

The phone dropped.

Lucy tore it out of the wall. Used it to smash every decorative hanging piece she could. Went for vases and lamps. Upturned tables.

Tore wallpaper away and carved stuffing from the couches. Howled. Splashed black paint over the delicate creams. Destroyed the pretty tomb Martin Brenner built for her.

Made it a warm hell. A nest. A stomach.

Unable to hear herself wail.

She lifted a chair and aimed for the piano.

Froze.

Dropped it aside and staggered to sit. Dizzy off paint fumes and adrenaline.

When had her knuckles started to pulse? Bright red dripped down a fresh cut. Calming and fizzled. It collected down warm flesh. Lucy wiped her bloody hand on the side of her designer blouse. Poised her fingers to play the haunting tune of *Ave Maria*.

It still sounded breathtaking in the black moonlight.

Jim would be on his way to Joyce.

Joyce.

Lucy crumbled and stopped playing. Shut the keys to cry into her hands. Trying to stop it because it wouldn't do much good for the dead.

"Ms. Garland."

"Will?" Lucy shut off. Perking.

The one working lamp in the corner flickered. Surges plucked. Lucy lifted to see it. Her porch light echoed the call. Shoes slipped on before she was out into the cold wind. Picking up her clothes to beckon her forth. Past the treehouse and back gate. Into the dark woods without a light.

Lucy heard herself breathe. Followed cracking branches.

Blood dripped steadily down her ring finger. Hit the dirt.

“Will?” Lucy trembled. Baby hairs lifting with goosebumps. Her entire spine frosted. A hand lifted to grasp a branch and touched slime. Warm flesh with a beating pulse.

A shadow growled. Leaned out to see her there.

A monster like something that would hide under a child’s bed. Something that would drag you into a sewer and feast, feast, feast until the long rest takes it.

Lucy opened her mouth to scream before it tore at her blouse to throw her into the thrush. Clawing out, spindling fingers wrapped around her ankle. Tugged. A cry erupted.

Face to face. Sort of. This elongated beast looked right at her in the dark. No eyes, but it locked in. Opened its flower of a face to roar with miles of teeth.

There was this staggering moment. Where they felt like equals.

Lavender erupted out. Made it whine and rumble before she found a rock and bashed its skull aside.

Lucy tore to get up. Clothing shredded. Sprinting to go away and lock the gate. Falling into the grass with her aching body scrambling further.

It didn’t come back for her. Silence crept as if that thing never existed.

Every lock in her house was clicked. Lucy barricaded the back door with the sofa. Tucked herself into the bathtub and let the water spray. Hours of scrubbing and crying and shaking until she was stumbling into bed. Arms wound around a baseball bat.

Adrenaline was lost. Sending her into a world where blood shined black in the moonlight.

Gods above, it was beautiful.

The last working phone in her bedroom trilled. Sent her gasping to wake. Bright and early.

“Mmmff...hello?” She closed her eyes from daylight’s burn. Felt drunk. “Yes?”

“You weren’t at the funeral home, we could have used you.”

“They gave me the week off, Martin.” She pushed up, groaning. “I’m...redecorating.”

He hummed.

“I don’t have anything for you, I’ll call if I do. I’m sure your hands are full with more dead bodies.”

“It’s Thursday. Be here within the hour.”

“Right.” Lucy slammed the phone and tore that one out too. Covered all the bruising on her body with long sleeves and high slacks. Unable to contact anyone else, she was out on her way to Hawkins Lab. Meeting Brenner at the door.

“What happened here?” Finger tipped her chin aside to see a splash of purple on her jaw and neck. Little cuts where the monster grabbed her and broke skin.

“I made contact too.” She looked haunted.

“And you didn’t report this?”

“Would you have swept in to save me?” Lucy passed him to go inside. Martin followed with ease. “I heard him. Will.”

“Impossible.”

“You and I both know that’s bullshit.” Lucy craned to see him when they got into the elevator. Nothing to give him. Empty. “Christ. This whole place stinks of bleach and rot. Has it always been like that? And you...fuck, Martin, I can’t even smell that cologne. It’s all salt.”

She was itching her neck red right where the claws barely

scratched her skin open. Martin observed her and said nothing. Led them both into the room to change into hazmat suits.

“Don’t tear this one off. And stay silent in there.”

“I know how you like your women.” Lucy passed him. Martin scowled and followed again. Down into the room where all his little ducks were in a row. The lucky agent, Shepard, was being prepped with tethers to enter the new world.

"He's handsome." Lucy cooed. Knowing he wouldn't be for long.

“Clear.” Men passed around. Eager and on edge. Lucy eyed the metal cords. Bolted into the floor so the agent could be tugged back like a caught fish.

“You boys hear me alright in there?”

“Loud and clear, Shepard.” A scientist spoke into the intercom. Lucy came to Martin’s right. Anticipation quelled. Would have made the air smoky. Even in her suit now, she could taste it.

“Good luck in there, son.” Martin nodded. Doting.

“He’s going to die in there.” Lucy spoke calmer as the agent approached. Not hearing her. Other men eyed her with vast unease. “I’d love to embalm the body after. What a lovely mess he’ll make for me.”

“I told you to be silent.” Martin frowned.

“What’s Connie up to? I get the feel you’re hiding her from me, darling.” Lucy displayed her teeth. “Scared I’m going to make her spit blood? I know she killed Benny. She’d be your first choice to embark on such a mission.”

“Are you going to behave in here?”

“Have I ever?” Lucy sighed. Bratty as can be.

They watched Shepard sink into the gloom. The belly of the beast awaiting him. Lucy wondered about all those other people steadily

going missing. She wondered what Eleven was doing right now.

If she were anything like Terry, she was likely fighting hard.

“This thing that attacked you. Was it like a man, but it had no face?” Martin turned after another beat. Steady silence pooling as they tried to keep track of their agent.

“Yes. You’ve seen it?”

“Just what our phone reports and bugs have found.” He sighed, head shaking. “How did you get away?”

Lucy didn’t want to tell him, but the truth was evident. Martin lit up as if it were Christmas morning.

“You can influence it?”

“I don’t know,” she droned, “I got lucky.”

“I don’t think that’s lucky, my dear, you’ve not had your fill of luck since we met.”

“That’s for damn sure.” She stared at the soft lights echoing. “It’s almost beautiful. Don’t you think so?”

Again, Brenner said nothing.

“Sir, he’s stopped responding.” The man at the head turned. Martin hurried forward.

“Try him again.”

“Shepard, come in. Confirm comm.”

Static.

Lucy inched toward the window to see. Dead silence. Enthrilled by the dead glow. She touched the window and longed to feel those lights twirling her fingers.

“This is Shepard. Confirming, over.”

The entire room perked. Martin drew closer.

“Shepard?” He urged. “Where are you?” More static and ominous rumbling. “Can you describe to us what it is you see? Over.”

“It’s low visibility. I’m about one click south of the rift.”

Lucy watched on as suited men fed more of the metal cord into the breach.

“Everything’s still here, but it’s eroded. Covered in blood...” The radio was fizzling. Low growls fluttered. A click.

“Shepard. Do you copy?” Martin persisted. It sounded like his voice quivered. Breathing followed, quick and heavy. “Shepherd. Can you hear me?”

“I’ll bet he smells like pie.” Lucy mumbled to herself. The mere thought watered her mouth. “A tart strawberry rhubarb, I hope. I always loved that.”

“There’s something else...” Shepard picked up quickly. *“There’s something else in here!”*

“Of course there is.” Lucy breathed. Unblinking. Those distant echoes picked up louder under his panic. The beast with no face and its guttural growls.

Lights surged red. Sirens blared.

“Reel him in.” Brenner turned sharp to shout it. Enraged. “Reel him back in!” Men scrambled and shouted in a panic. Trying to jerk and roll the metal cord back. Shouts overlapped.

“Pull me out!” There was a squelch of tearing flesh. The men in here were practically pissing themselves.

Lucy made an odd sound and Brenner thought she was sobbing. He crept up behind. Thought to hold her.

Until her head tossed back. Bouncing in place like a giddy child. Laughter. Pure and pouring fresh like spurting blood. She clapped her

hands and laughed. Unadulterated mania.

The cord was tossed all directions until it was reeled in. Nothing but shredded tissue was left of that brave man.

Lucy laughed harder when she saw it. Braced her hands on the window.

Silly rabbit, she mused in her daydreams, *tricks are for kids*.

The laughter fizzled but didn't end.

"Get out of here. Secure the area and clean that up!" Martin barked, head shaking. He had Lucy by the wrist. Had to be dragged out again. "You're losing control. You think this is funny?"

"It's marvelous." She wheezed to get her air back. Shoes clacking around when they got to the room to undress. Hands braced her tired body into a bench. Sitting.

Her chest ached from laughing so hard. It kept coming.

Martin was tossing his suit off behind her. She followed, standing up.

"You deserve this, you know?" Black hair bounced when her head snapped up. "All the hate and ugly you put into the world. It's right there before you now and it's lashing back."

"It sounded like my mother," Martin paused to face the wall with one hand braced flat, "did you hear it?"

"It's exactly what you asked for. We all feed it and it gives back what we need to draw us in. It's learning." Lucy came up. Tried to be steady in an unsteady world. "Evolving like me."

"You smiled as that man died."

"You smiled as you killed me." She recounted and he swerved again to see her eyes. "It's almost ethereal. Beautiful, like the dreams I've been having these long years. All the decay and mold, peeling up. The dancing spores and sickness. My sickness. It knows me. The

world is touched by the pain you caused all of us and it won't let you forget now."

"You think this place will spare you?" He hissed at her, crossing.

"No," Lucy shook her head and detached again from this world, "I'll bet everything floats in there, Martin. I bet we'll float too."

Lucy's red lips spread to smile.

"We'll all float too."

"You're stepping out of line."

"The Lab needs Mia more than it needs me. She's always been the stable one. All the work she put in for this place. Growth. What have I brought? Death and pain. Ruin. You forgot a big detail the day we met. Lucretia always dies in the end for the brave new world. Creating a world where she doesn't..." Lucy shuddered. "This new design. Untold wonder and horror. Mingled together at my beckoning. I've never felt more alive."

Martin studied her there. Seemed to consider it himself. What her development in this universe meant. If she ever could be contained again.

"You're the monster." He came close. Almost like he might kiss her. Lucy matched him. Hissing.

"Hear me roar."

She only sighed. Rejuvenated. Cool as can be.

"Sleep on it, Martin." Lucy dropped all pretense. Stared at him eerily still. A vibration shook his entire core apart.

Heels clicked off before being bid.

But, he let her go today. Watched Lucy flit away and smelled endless sugar plums.

** **

Lucy wanted to call Joyce. Wanted to call Jim. Wanted to scream. Instead, she drove toward home. Thought of Will Byers' voice so stark and clear in her head.

Also wanted to sweep all the glass shards up into a pile and lie in it.

An odd sight caught her at The Hideaway. Jim's Blazer parked around the side.

Drinking. After Will's death. Drinking to medicate and forget.

Lucy skidded to park. Went in and saw his eyes go wide. A man next to him got up to use the restroom so Lucy crossed over.

"Jim--"

"I'm working."

"What?" Her eyes snapped to his drink.

"Statie who found Will. I don't trust this. Any of it. I'm running a sting." He sipped some amber alcohol and Lucy touched his hand.

"Jim, they found a body." Did she believe it either? No. Should she nurture this same thing in Jim? Probably not.

"Yeah. A body. I don't know, Joyce has been...saying some strange stuff."

"And you want to believe her. She's your friend." Lucy looked down. Didn't ask about his library trip. Spoke before he could protest. "I'm not leaving. I'm sticking this out with you. Joyce is my friend and you have that troubled look in your eyes."

She reasoned that she was getting involved to keep him out of danger.

Really, if anyone was going to help put these pieces together, it was Jim.

Perhaps Lucy neglected that she held many above his head.

But, facing this...it was important to her. That clock was still ticking.

Lucy ordered herself a drink and moved around the bar where she could keep watch. Waiting until the statie, O'Bannon, made his way back to watch the game.

Jim turned on this side he rarely showed. Chipper and all. Trying to charm his way under his new friend's skin. Lucy wondered about the big city cop with a sly smile and huge dreams.

Sara's name had Lucy's eyes snapping up. Jim playing buddy-buddy. He peered at her taking a longer drink. It was almost genius how Jim swayed into his line of questioning.

"I know you...you famous or somthin'?" Jim flicked his ashes

"Oh, you might have seen me on the TV, I, uh...I found that Byers boy."

"So, you on that case or what?" Jim stared at the TV like he was half listening.

Lucy heard a game of pool erupt behind her. Every scent seemed to gnaw on her skin. Alcohol. Smoke. Sweat. Regret. Fingers lifted to massage the raw area where the monster made contact. Chilled skin prickling.

"I just saw him on patrol, you know? Dumb luck." This guy fell right into Jim's hands.

"So that quarry..." Jim continued and Lucy got up, downing her drink before she went to the restroom.

The drink came up along with whatever she'd eaten prior. Right into the toilet bowl. Chest heaving, she washed her mouth out and looked at herself. Really looked.

That place. She heard the whispers etching out. Like the colors painting the air smothering her to pieces.

"Ms. Garland."

“Will...?” Lights flickered and it all changed. Transformed to rot and decay. Lucy gasped to fly backwards. Saw a boy charge past and look back. Huge welling eyes. He could see her. She smelt him. Loud and clear. “Will.”

"I didn't bottle enough." He'd whimpered. Looking far beyond her. Terrified.

"Then, run." She cast out. "You'll find it."

Lucy moved like she might chase him into the walls.

One spark and it all went normal. A rubber band snapping. Hands felt aimlessly for the boy. Nothing.

The door opened and a woman crossed in. Didn't pay Lucy any mind on her way out. Near a row of payphones, she stilled to breath. It even smelled the same. Lush and full of perfectly alive beings. Monsters who felt deep and endless.

Back at the bar, Jim overstepped because O'Bannon was getting up. Clearly annoyed.

“Thanks for ruining the game, dick.” He snatched his coat to go.

Jim shook his head. Took a longer drink. Clearly not finished.

“You alright? You look flushed.” He caught Lucy's expression. She stuffed a strawberry candy into her lips. Crunched it.

“Do you want him alone? Outside?” She asked instead. Jim puffed in response. A sly grin crossed. “Give me about ninety seconds.” Lucy undid one button on her green blouse. Heard Jim snicker as she followed after the grump.

“Hey, sailor.” Lucy caught up with O'Bannon at the door shrugging his coat on. Her head cocked, chest out. He noticed the siren and came to her. “I'm in sort of a bind. Can you spare a girl a quick jump?”

Burnt sugar wafted. Blew his pupils out. Sniffing the blood was second nature, she never thought about it.

"I'd so appreciate it." One finger drew down his cotton shirt.

"Yeah," he looked her up and down, "yeah, sweetie, where's your car?"

"Around back. Where it's quiet...and private." Lucy slipped past him. Peered back. "Are you coming?"

"Right behind you..." O'Bannon stumbled after her. Around the building. "Where's your car?"

"Silly me, I must have forgotten." Lucy turned at the same time quick steps hit the gravel.

Jim grabbed the trooper by his jacket and shoved him into the building. A punch landed. Lucy watched Jim wail on this guy like a real rough and tumble professional. Face and stomach. Pulled the air from his pathetic lungs.

Her dainty knees shook. Eyes watching Jim shake the man about until blood misted.

Found herself thinking of an old lullaby her mother used to hum sweetly.

My heart is pierced by Cupid, I disdain all glittering gold.

There is nothing can console me but my jolly sailor bold.

An obscene warmth filled her stomach. She wanted to suck the man dry of his fear and let Jim fuck her over a car hood. God, she was losing her mind. The release of it all was freeing. Madness ends. Life begins.

Hands trembled with a great hunger. She bit her lip at Jim grunting before he grasped the man's jaw.

"Okay, let's try this one more time." Jim bared his teeth at the groaning heap trapped before him. Lucy reeled in. Smelt tart fear. Her mouth watered again.

Fingers pressed into skin. Knuckles bursting red. Blood trickled

down O'Bannon's brow.

"Who told you to be out there?" Jim snarled. "What were you doing out there?"

A fist cocked.

Lucy already knew.

"I don't know!" The pissing man burst. "I don't know! They...They just told me to call it in and not let anyone get too close."

"Get close to what?" Hopper breathed pure fire. Lucy felt this prickle up her spine. Striking cords.

"The body."

"Who do you work for? The NSA? Hawkins Lab?" Jim shook him around. Saw O'Bannon's eyes turn beyond them. A car engine cranked. Lucy's jaw dropped. "Who is that?"

They saw her.

"You're gonna get us both killed."

"Who is that?" Jim got frantic.

"Jim, we have to go." Lucy went for his arm. Tugging.

"Hey! Hey!" Jim let the man go to race forward toward a black car that was charging off. Lucy felt her stomach dip in. O'Bannon scurried off.

There was this beating pulse. This urge to kill him. On instinct. Loose ends.

Lucy shuddered, stepping back into the wall.

The sensation awakened her soul. Light a fire under it.

"Jim, we have to go now." She stumbled forward, gasped at him while he panted aimlessly.

"I need a favor." Eyes met. "Drop your car and your house. I'm going to meet you there."

"Jim, don't do this." Hands pulled his face to focus. Eyes locked intently. Breathless now. "You're trying to spin air into gold. Asking for a miracle."

He gave her this aching look as if to ask, *haven't you ever wanted to see one? Just once. Maybe it would make all this pain worth it. We could crystallize.*

These events with astronomical odds. Maybe they were little commonplaces we refused to look at. We forget to appreciate how life twists and brings us together. How a specific woman and a specific man can love each other at the same time. The same place. One perfect collision in time. Two stars exploding.

How they can hold and love each other just because they were alive. Here. Despite a million reasons they shouldn't have been.

Jim and Lucy collided at the same time. An atomic kiss with no breath in sight. Defied the strict laws of thermodynamics. Fingers pulling for more and souls that delivered. They birthed a miracle.

"I need you." Jim admitted. Feverish. Pecking her lips again before he let a weight lift away. His nose grazed her own before he came out to see her. Unwavering.

"I need you, too." She brushed a strand of his hair aside.

As Lucy looked at him, she realized it.

He had to do this.

And she was supposed to help him see. Whatever that meant.

"Give me a task to do." Lucretia's fate was always sealed. Jim brightened, appeared more assured with her at his side.

Lucy stared at Jim's eyes again. Heard that same ticking. Five minutes to midnight. Knew that all of her secrets would unravel. Knew she'd lose Jim's affection in the process. Lose her soul to a

blackening horizon.

Knew this was exactly where she was supposed to be.

A miracle.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone. I appreciate anyone reading. Please chat with me if you have the time. I changed departments at work so my stories are both going to slow up. My tumblr is Alias-B

19. Lucretia

Notes for the Chapter:

Tentatively posting this fic while I put my other on hold to save myself some pressure. Only pushing this out because of the progress I made last night :) Fingers crossed, I'm just trying to do right by myself and be careful. TW: Death/suicide threats. Smut. Brenner being his cheery self. Lucy's abilities begin to evolve as Jim makes strides with the mystery at hand.

"Jim, this sounds-"

"Luce, I know it's crazy. I know it sounds crazy. We both know Joyce well enough and I... Something doesn't add up. Feel that much."

"Like you wouldn't believe." She was curled up in his Blazer. Holding herself. Bracing for a blow under a night sky. "Why are we at the morgue, Jim?"

"Need you to get me in there to see Will's body."

"What?"

Eyes blazed. Almost glowed while the sky began to fall all peach and blue velvet.

"I won't stop until it comes together."

"I know that," she tried not to weep, "I like that about you."

"Most find it insufferable." His lip quirked.

"They're stupid. More people should fight like you do. Even if you are a touch insufferable, stubborn bear." Lucy touched his face and resigned herself. "They sent Gary home, you said earlier?"

"Yes and someone from the state handled it. Doesn't make sense."

“Strange. And did Joyce go for the identity?”

“She ran out screaming,” Jim rubbed his temples, “Jonathan sorta took over the funeral planning.” Brown eyes shifted to see inside the building. The soft lamplight glowing.

“Patty’s working late. I’ll get you in. Three minutes.” Lucy got out. Thought of a thousand lies she could have told as Patty shifted in her chair, swiveling to check some files behind her. Lucy crept and let lavender brew hot. Vast.

The woman shifted. Tumbled over completely. Lucy gasped at the desk.

"Oops."

Her teeth flashed with embarrassment.

“That’s new...” One brow rose. Patty slept soundly. Covered as Jim made his way in. “Clear. She...stepped out.” Lucy stood straighter, sniffing blood back. Jim followed her with quick steps into the hallway where Lucy stopped. A boy in uniform guarding the damn door. Reading.

“Hey,” Jim spoke with some extra pep, “I love that book. It’s a nasty mutt.”

“I never liked his endings.” Lucy added, a halcyon expression as she didn’t break stride to keep up with Jim.

“You two can’t be back here.” The officer jerked to his feet.

"I work for the funeral home and I'm only here to do a quick measurement-"

“Yeah, I just got off the line with O’Bannon. He said that he needs to see you at the station.” Lies poured out. “It’s some emergency...”

“What the hell are you talking about? I don’t work with O’Bannon.” The younger cop narrowed.

“Did I say O’Bannon? I mean, uh...”

Jim and Lucy exchanged looks. A stressed smile crossed his face.

“Okay.” Jim smacked his lips. Punched the officer point blank. Knocked him out cold.

“Effective.” Lucy watched him swipe the keys. Entered behind him into a chilly, dark room. A breath stuttered and Jim crossed the room. Opening metal drawers until... “Will.”

The cover was yanked back and Lucy tried to look away. Couldn’t. Her eyes swept with a funny expression.

“What?” Jim swallowed and had to step aside, watching her face.

“Jim, I’ve seen a lot of dead bodies.” Lucy mused. “A child lost in the quarry. In that water for as long as he was. He wouldn’t look this good. Something with teeth would have eagerly fed on him at least. His skin isn’t right.” She touched her chest. The revelation was too stark.

Jim closed his eyes. Tried to process it. Touched the body. Narrowed.

“It’s...” He opened his shiny pocket knife. The one she’d gotten him. Plunged it into Will’s chest before Lucy could even cry out. Hands latched to his coat as she buried her face. Heard the cutting. “Lucy. Lucy, look at this...”

Jim had the fake skin pulled back. Yanking stuffing out. Confirming what she might have known. What Joyce chased.

“He’s out there still.”

“Yeah,” Jim closed the knife, aimlessly grasped her hand, “they faked it.”

“They?”

“Still spotty. C’mom.” Hopper pulled her out of that place so they could leave. Too silent in the car as Lucy resumed clutching herself.

“What are you going to do?” Lucy pressed. Fear crept. “Jim, please

talk to me. What are you thinking?"

He didn't want to tell her his next moves. Eyed the clock. Half past eight.

"I'm going to keep looking. Take you home and sleep on it. You need to rest."

"No!" Lucy sprang forward. Almost got caught in her seatbelt. "I want to stay with you. Let me stay. It's not...I just think it'll be safe. Please." Those pleading eyes melted his resolve and he had to change plans.

Jim sighed again. Let her take his hand.

"We'll sleep on it, Luce. Figure out our next moves in the morning. I need more before I bring this to Joyce." He stared at the road. Pulled up to his trailer in pitch black night. "All this looking into Hawkins Lab...I'm seeing all these people who were scarred in some way. Separated to make it look like a series of little clumsy accidents. This place just...uses them and tosses them out, I..."

She touched his lips to quiet him.

"Let's go inside and rest and not talk about it. We'll sleep and come back with level heads. Trust me...I won't let you run head first into this." Lucy welled and he couldn't see in the night. She clung to him all the way up into the house. Tried to make him stay and forget. Jim dropped his belt and keys, turned to see Lucy standing too close. Eerily still.

Hands pushed his coat off.

"We'll stay right here...where it's safe and sound." She smiled hopefully, nodding. A kiss. Light as a feather. "Yeah? The world doesn't exist right here. Not until we wake." Lucy pulled her blouse up. Let his hands roam under. Fingers traced her skin.

Maybe it was wrong. To give herself over one last time. Knowing that she'd be lost to him. A stranger. A painful memory.

Could have been why she didn't utter three nearby words. Same

words that quelled her heart and smelled of cinnamon.

“Stay with me.” Lucy mumbled with her hands slipping behind his neck, bringing those lips down for a taste. “Please, Jim.”

“You’re shaking.” Jim brought her in, bodies swaying to touch the wall. She dropped to her knees. Trying to atone. Undoing his belt. Pawing and aimless. Persuasive.

Jim moaned when her mouth was on him. Already taking him deeper than she should have. Smearing red. Fingers pulled at black hair. An obscene pop filled the room. Made him vibrate and rut back in. Fucking into her lips. Lucy pulled at his loose clothes. Begging to be used. Wanted to make him feel so good until he was forgetting things.

An unmistakable sound of fingers between slick legs made him slow. She moaned around his girth. Licked her way up, head tilted back with glossy lips.

“Hear what you do to me?” Lucy sounded breathless. Hair still in his grip. “Seeing you come alive today, fuck. Jim...” His thumb ran her lips, eyes meeting even in darkness. She suckled the digits. Kissed his red knuckles better. “I would have let you fuck me up against the alleyway.”

“Get up.” Jim had her arms, stopped the play as they scrambled. Filthy kisses until they managed to find the couch. Lucy pushing into his lap. “Take your clothes off.”

She purred and shed her layers before him. Wings unfurling. Nerves sparked and he kissed her nipples. Scruff swatching red.

“Still trying to play with yourself, you’re not being fair or patient.” Teeth caught one bud. Tugged. A mewl as he pulled her wrists together.

“Maybe you ought to spank me, Chief Hopper.” She cooed. Arms got free to snake around his neck. Tongue flicking into his mouth. “Want you to.” Lucy slipped down nude. Spread over his lap. Jim paused, suddenly uncertain. He’d spanked her during the act itself.

“Give it to me, please.”

Needy pleas began to spill. Atonement in the only way she knew how at this hour.

Lucy wiggled, jostled his cock against her hip. Earned a hiss before he held her still.

“Shouldn’t tease, sweetheart.” He rubbed her bottom. Sat up a little.

Lucy clutched the cushions and pressed her face down. Brought her bottom up to meet him.

Smack!

She gushed. Moaned. Begged for more. Jim took his time between swats. Massaged her bottom too sweetly.

Smack!

“Fuck, harder.” Lucy perked up. “I can take it. Hit me harder.”

Smack!

A cry roused. Jim heard her breathing get shaky and paused.

“Don’t stop!” She clawed for the couch. Begged within inches of breath. Jim growled. Spanked her consecutively until her ass was blushed. As she still rocked and urged. Eyes watered. The cries sounded broken so he stopped immediately. Worked his fingers over prickly flesh.

“More.” Lucy mumbled, lips quivering. “Use your belt.”

When it didn’t feel like play anymore, Jim leaned over to see her expression in the spilling moonlight from the open window behind him.

“Lucy...?”

Pitiful eyes framed with bleeding makeup blazed back. Still holding

her hip, Jim's free hand touched her jaw.

"Please give me the belt, I deserve it. I'll let you fuck me anyway after. Please Jim. I need it." She rose to straddle him again. Cupping his face to press their heads together. Sniffling. Hands smoothed down her arms, trying to make her stop shaking. He hushed her, inordinate with that brand of compassion Jim Hopper was known for. Lucy broke with a tremor.

"Force me." She drew a finger over his mouth. Jim pulled her in for a kiss. More followed. Little butterflies on her cheeks and lips. Delicate wings opening and closing.

"Shhh. I got you." Jim coaxed, nudging his head into her. Once Lucy seemed to settle down. "Lucretia."

"Say it again."

"Lucretia." He mused even softer. Slower. A visceral sort of sensation fizzled their nerves. "Come here. Just feel me."

Lucy quelled with that alone. Tossed her arms around his neck. Held him close and he returned the embrace in full. Hips shifted. Helped him line up to sink down. Sighs mingled. Passionate hearts thudding in perfect sync.

She couldn't speak. Head tilting back to just feel him. Fingers sinking into flesh as she rocked. Made of moonlight. Dewy like an ethereal siren, flung from the sea. Glowing as Jim watched her move. Filled and drowning in him.

"That's it, baby." Husky voice groaning, Jim let himself be lost too. Lucy clung to him. Fucked him and herself. Harder. Unable to stop. Hands cupped her breasts. Played with her. Slipped to where their legs met.

"Make me come, Jim, I want it. So good." Lucy bounced. Worked him over the peak first with her body. A cry shook when she followed him. Curving in to practically sob along his shoulder. Chasing the end of their release. Fingers massaged to ease all those aches. Jim smoothed her hair back. Kissed her deeply. Pecked those tears aside.

It would have been so easy to just tell him she loved him. Here under the iridescent moon.

Instead, just feeling it was enough.

Jim heaved her frame up. Cradled Lucy the way she needed right now. Settled her into a bed and tucked her in.

“Stay.” She drowsily grabbed at him. “Stay.”

“Go to sleep. Gotta change. I’ll be back,” he patted her head, “I’ll be right back. I promise.”

Jim wasn't like Mia in this way. He sometimes broke his promises and Mia never has.

Lucy fell into a fit of dreamless slumber. Immersed in burnt sugar and spicy cinnamon. Decadent treats that were lost into the night.

Still illuminated under the moon. Naked in twisting sheets. Lucy felt fingertips trail coolly up her spine.

“Lucy.” The voice coaxed. “Wake up, my dear.”

A door smacked distantly. Voices overlapped. Lucy felt for Jim and only touched the cold side of the mattress he never occupied.

“Lucy.” The tone beckoned out. Eyes turned to Martin Brenner smiling at her. Lips opened to scream before a palm smacked her jaw shut.

“Don’t be like this. Get up.” He tugged her dragging frame forth. Not bothered as she held sheets around her exposed body. Agents came around. Hauled her until she began to kick. Martin led the way into the living room where she was thrown to the carpet. They all looked at her twisting in billowy sheets. Snarling.

Guns went up.

“Martin!” Lucy wheezed, pushing to her knees.

“Explain why we found your Chief wandering the Lab at one in the

morning?” Brenner fixed his coat. Jim was dragged in and tossed over the couch in a heap. Knocked out and sweaty. Agents prodded through his house. Tugged his shoes and jacket off.

“Don’t touch him!” Lucy spat venom. Flung herself over the armrest to gather Jim’s lulling head and torso toward her body. “What have you done?”

“Your one job was to watch him.” Martin pointed a gun. “You couldn’t even do that right!”

“Stop, stop!” Lucy cried, covering Jim with her body. Watched the agents move and dump his pill bottles all over the table. “Leave him alone.”

“He saw the opening.” Martin shook his head.

“No one will believe him! He’s... He’s an addict. He’s a mess, he hates this job. This town.” Lucy crumbled, holding the draped sheet over her body with one arm. “Martin, this will make it all worse. Don’t do this, please. I need him.”

“Like you need me?” He waved his agents backwards.

“No, I need you more.” Lucy pushed up, tugging something from Jim’s belt. She came into Brenner’s arms. Found his eyes. “And you need me too, don’t you? Until this ends at least.”

A click pushed a blade toward her breast. Jim’s pocket knife. Martin shifted to seize it and she backed up. Threatening the agents with one hand up. The sheet tied around her body drooped, exposing one breast.

Goddess. Siren. Lucretia.

Lucy looked celestial in the moon with the shimmering blade at her tender throat.

“Lucy, put it down.”

“I’ll kill myself and everyone in this room as I die. Back off.” She hissed. Pressed the blade enough to draw the smallest trickle of

blood. Stained Jim's sheets. Martin slid toward her.

"You wish to bargain now."

"I have something to bargain with. My life." She inched away. Stood in front of Jim's limp frame. "And I know something you don't know. I learned a secret. When I leaned in close to that place...that gate. The monster that made contact with me. I understand it all now."

"And what do you want?"

"Jim and Mia protected. This town protected. And I want Eleven. If you find her, Terry's girl is a fighter. More than you'll ever understand. I want to protect Eleven myself when you take us back for your grand plans. Before you use me up."

"Who says I haven't yet? Maybe you're old news." Martin's head cocked. A smirk crossed.

"I'll give you what you want most, Martin. I'll give you me. I'll come with you and be yours. Only yours. I'll never fight again. I'll never run away. I won't even fake it."

His eyes glinted at that.

"I'll come with you and live in your palace. No make believe, we'll be past the point of no return. The world will be all sugar plums." Lucy shuddered. Came to him. "And we'll build a better one. You and I. But, let Jim go. Right now."

"And the secret that's going to save you?" He asked calmer, eyes intent.

"The monster. The gate. We made contact. It touched me." Lucy brought the knife lower, kept it poised at her heart. "I feel a charge. In my abilities."

"Show me."

Lucy tilted her eyes to one of his agents. Shed lavender and watched him drop instantly into a sleep. More blood dribbled from

her nose.

Martin's head cocked. That universal chilling motion for one sentiment.

Fascinating.

"I imagine the other scents yield similar results. I've collected scent for about eighteen years now, Martin. And the people they stuck too. I see them. I can see into that place and I saw Will Byers there. I'm amplified. Evolving. I thought I was dying, but I'm mutating with no end. Into something brand new. That place opened and its light touched me. I can't turn from it and neither can you. Can't you? You're too curious and you want to breathe life into a better world. Yours and mine."

"If it charged you, it'll charge the rest. Eleven too. Anyone else we pluck with with similar enhancements." Martin waved so his men began to trail out.

"You can't possibly contain it. But, I'd love a front row seat to watch you try." Lucy dropped the knife on the table. "I'm all yours. Let's just go. Like you wanted."

She came to his arms.

"Martin." Lucy cooed gently. He turned to see her eyes again. Cupped her face.

"And your Chief?"

"He was a distraction from fate. I realize that now. I'll gather my things and break the news to him tomorrow." Lucy brought the sheet closer. "Let's go."

Brenner turned, nodded to his men to finish up and leave. Lucy put some clothing on. Grabbed the rest she'd been leaving here. Even her insulin in the fridge.

Jim liked to have some. Just in case.

Because he loved her so much.

She walked out with two bags. Into the arms of a man who has done nothing but use and wound her. Then call it affection when the bruises bloom like petunias.

Martin Brenner cannot love. He'll never understand what it takes.

Lucy smiled at him. Took his hands and walked out into the moon. Noted that it looked bloodied tonight.

"It's beautiful." Lucy observed into the distance as he unlocked his car.

"What is?"

Eyes met. She stood there. Unnervingly still. Pleasant as can be like she might be baking a pie.

"The future." She inhaled pure cinnamon. Still held it close. "I know that now. I know lots of things."

Lucy got into the car. Let him drive her home. Kissed him at the door.

"Once this ends, we'll be clearing out your place. You can bring the piano to my house if you like."

"It's funny how you can believe that." Lucy went inside. "You almost seem like a little boy again."

"Believe, what?" Martin stepped toward her.

"That this will ever end while we live." She exhaled. "Goodnight, Martin."

The door shut.

Lucy swept all the mirror shards and debris into a neater pile. Stared down and saw that decaying place looking back. Saw the faces of everyone she lost. Hopeful and intent back on her.

Inhale.

"I can smell you all." She turned. Saw them lined up in wait. Matching expressions. Lights where their eyes should be. "What's happening to me?"

Logan beamed. Came forward.

"Well, I'm pretty sure, Lucy, you just lost your mind."

Lucy's lips rose.

"*O-Oh*. Better in the company of old friends." She scanned. Blinked and they disappeared. All but him. "I see that place while I'm wide awake."

"Have you ever smelt your mother's old perfume at the store and felt as if she'd been standing right there next to you?" Logan crossed to her side. "You collected scent and you have it in your back pocket. When needed. We're here, Lucy. Because you think you need us, but you've had everything you needed to fight this. Right there in your chest."

"None of you should have died for me." Lucy held herself. Touched her temple and indulged this.

"We died because a man made it so. But, you'll always be worth it. I knew that when I stayed. People will fight for and with you. You're a person who inspires loyalty. You're the first one. And if you stand against Brenner, one man, others will follow. You can beat him at this game. You know what you have to do."

"I don't."

"You will when the time comes." Logan admired the moon. Full and bright. They all served the beaming glow. "You're the only person alive who can see what Martin Brenner lacks. And you have it to spare. So, I say, give him what he wants. Exactly what he asked you for from the first. Lucretia died so a new world could be built upon her body as the foundation. Imagine the hell she could have raised if she lived to see it bloom."

"I bet it'll be beautiful under the moonlight." Lucy looked out too.

“Don’t look back and don’t look away.” Logan smiled. “We can see you here on the other side. And we can only stay as long as you believe and fight. You don’t need us, Lucy, you have you. That’s enough.”

“I miss you.”

He smiled.

“You have me.” Logan turned from her. Left Lucy alone. Left her to see herself in the many shards again. The moon began to fall. Painted the sky a dangerous sweltering red with the soon to be morning sun.

It still ached. It was still something to endure. She wouldn’t be anyone’s foundation.

But, Lucretia found herself surrounded in colors. Able enough to prepare for what would come next.

Notes for the Chapter:

My baby, doing the most to protect her loved ones. When I set out to write this fic, I had no idea what it would evolve into and I’m so thankful I get to keep working on it. Thank you all so much for the support and patience and leave words if you have them! xoxo

20. The Night We Met

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks everyone. Enjoy the emotional chapter. Talk to me, I hope you have time! Lucy's secrets begin to unravel with the opening rift. TW: Jim's anger and mention of lab experiments.

Those frantic knocks in the morning.

Lucy knew they'd come like bells tolling.

Knew Jim would rush to her with more questions.

She rose from the piano where she'd been skimming keys. Dressed and pristine in a liquid gold blouse and black skirt. Brenner hadn't allowed her to go to Will's funeral. She was supposed to stay inside, look pretty again, and keep quiet.

Very, very quiet. It was always easier for her to be digested when she was silent.

Hands shook on the way to the door. Opened it. Saw Jim's eyes and felt a little weak in the knees. He seemed haunted. Hardened like steel. That warm citrus she always smelled didn't billow like it usually did when they locked eyes.

Hopper started pushing in with one finger to his lips.

"What are you-?"

Jim covered her mouth. Removed his hat and went to a notepad. Apprehension curdled. Spoiled.

Could be listening. He looked around at the mess still there. Dressed in his street clothes. Brown coat, blue flannel, and jeans. Something grave on his face still. Another question dawned.

"Hey, Jim!" She got hushed as he unscrewed every single light. Made a bigger mess turning her house upside down. Lucy groaned,

poured herself a glass of wine and sat down at the table. "Jim, I need to talk to you. Ah, this thing we're doing-"

Lucy had it all prepared.

But, she wasn't prepared for the paper he smacked down in front of her. Palm flat to smooth the crumbled edges. Another hand yanked the glass away. Crashed it into the sink. A violent action from Jim made her flinch away.

"What the hell are you doing?" She roused with some anger. That grave expression burned. Lucy jilted up but he shoved her back down. Breathless and forcibly even.

"What are you doing?" She pushed up at him. Didn't look at the paper. "Let me go. Jim, this...thing. I can't-"

"Lucy," Jim began like a fuse creeping toward a stick of dynamite, "tell me why you're in this photo."

She only inhaled. Rust and rubber. Burning. Sweet decay. Too many emotions to process.

A newspaper clipping that was scanned from the library. One of the many Jim snatched to further mull over. A younger Brenner and his subjects. Terry. Alice. And an unmistakable figure behind them.

A Garland girl. Looking elsewhere. Coming down the steps. Picture perfect. Modelesque like she might be slinking toward the camera to tell viewers about a new perfume dripping in diamonds.

"What? That's not me, what is this?"

He chose to ignore her.

"Should be safe to speak here. I don't know. Figure they'd already have come running if it wasn't and I didn't find anything. Must be some trust there. I keep going over it all, Lucy. I can't stop." Jim leaned over her shoulder. One hand still on the image and the other gripping her arm. A motion a cop would make with the guilty. He felt her shake.

“Jim.”

“Where’d you go this morning?”

“Y-You took me home before the sun rose. Remember? We fought.”

“Bullshit, I went to Hawkins Lab last night and woke up in my trailer. Think they drugged me, but I remember enough.” He sat down and jerked her chair toward him. It made an unpleasant scrape against the tile. She cringed as if he might strike her, palms flat on her knees.

"No, Jim, you took me home after-"

“Lucy.” Jim said slower. Somehow sounding angrier. “Why are you in that place? I didn’t see this before, but I went back over all the evidence and you’re the only common denominator that started to show up. Why are you in the damn picture?”

“I don’t know what you’re-”

“Stop lying to me!” Jim shouted that. Sounding gouged now. He looked at her expression finally. Reached up to let two fingers trace her cheek. Calmed. “That’s what you’ve been doing all this time. Lying.”

“You took me home,” her lip wobbled, “it’s those pills.”

“Don’t do that to me, sweetheart.” Hopper flashed his teeth with a sardonic flare. Lucy had never seen such a striking cruel look in his eyes. Like he might just tear the bleating heart from her chest. Frankly, she would have let him. “I flushed them all this morning.”

“I don’t know what you want from me.”

“How about the truth? I have a line of breadcrumbs here, why are half of them pointed at you?” His voice rose. “I had to tell Joyce that her son was dea-”

The word clipped painfully. Jim crumbled and strained to hold steady. Gripping Lucy by the arms now.

“...But, he’s alive, isn’t he? You knew. You stood next to me all this time and you fucking knew. Kept showing up when things got strange. Making calls after. You knew Will was out there.”

Lucy went almost silent. Airy and trembling.

“Not fully until we saw the body.” She uttered, welling. The truth resonated into his eyes. This woman he’d cared for since they were children. Scarring him to the core because he’d let her under his skin where few have dwelled.

“You saw Will last. You’ve been to that place. That was taken over ten years ago! You know something! The photo. All the secrets. It’s all pointing to you. Tell me the damn truth, Lucy!”

He shook her. Harder that he meant because he was quaking. Lucy pushed at him, not budging.

“I know you’ve kept things. Since I came back, you’re not...you’ve never quite been *you* again. You’re not the Lucy I grew up with.”

“I am me, Jim, I am. I’m your friend.” She reached up and got her wrist snatched. The tattoo scorched when he looked at it.

“You’re the key to all of this, I feel it. It’s all pointing to you. I-goddamn...I know it! Stop fucking lying to me! This photo and when I was in that place I saw...the stuffed animal I got you when you were ten. I remember it. And this damn tattoo. It’s been you the whole time!” His face contorted with rage. It billowed off him. Loudly. “You lied to me.”

“I can’t...”

“Can’t?” Jim ripped the paper up and shoved it at her chest. She cried out. Eyes shutting. “You stuck around me to monitor the investigation, didn’t you? How do you know Martin Brenner? Huh?”

Lucy opened her eyes again, coming undone with the stress of it all. Searched his flames and whimpered.

“He made me do it.”

"Do, what?" Jim steamed.

"All of it." Lucy shuddered. "I can explain. Please. Please. Jim. Please, believe me." She clung to him, begging. "That place... He's had me since I was seventeen."

Jim rubbed his eyes, trying to breathe through the utter betrayal that was too many scents. Too many colors whirling.

Dainty fingers clung for his jacket. Unable to let him go. Lucy was hyperventilating as she shot up to go around him. Jim caught her around the neck without trying. Sent Lucy wheezing back into the chair. A fist curled and he just held her in place.

They really looked at each other. No longer silly kids wandering a technicolor fair. Chests heaving. Talons sunk into him. His hand went lax around her throat. Jim looked at the necklace there and she wondered if he'd rip it from her.

"Do we have to start fighting?" She gasped out, breaking further. Nothing to make this okay. Nothing to ease Jim's pain and that's what wounded her the most. "I'm so tired, Jim." Lucy laughed there. Eyes turned to the mini chandelier above the table. Twinkling. Starlight.

"Who the hell do you think you are, Lucy?" He'd hissed, inches from her face. Fingers pressed down and she blinked. Laughter followed again, weak and alive still. Barely. Tears cascading to bleed makeup.

"I don't know anymore, Jim," she tremored with a grin that cracked, "but I'm still the Lucy you pretended you forgot your hat for. Just so we could steal five more minutes together. I'm still that Lucy. I'm it. God, I want to be." She touched his wrist to feel the pulse quicken and Jim breathed, letting her go.

"That Lucy lied to me. That Lucy destroyed everything we had."

"She had no choice." Lucy still grasped for his arm. Just needed a tether to this world. Jim wasn't able to process that far. Farther than her lies that had reached the end of the Earth. He just stared in disbelief. In utter pain. An ocean filled the blank spaces between their two hearts.

Extraordinary. How you could have all and then none of someone with a simple bat of lashes.

Lucy whispered.

“They hurt us. They have Mia. You saw her there, didn’t you? It wasn’t a trick. They caused...everything. And I helped them.” Lucy cringed as he simmered and lowered his head. “If I tell you, they’ll know. They’re already following you. I can’t.”

“Mia?”

“They killed our parents and took her. They have us both, I can’t step out of line or they’ll-”

“Lucy, I swear to god, I need you to explain this because...” Jim pulled out her wrist. “What’s this mean?”

“I was the first one. Subject zero.”

“First, what?” He shook her again. Leaning in.

“I don’t,” she wheezed pitifully, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“It’s too late for that.” Jim shoved up with his own sarcastic laugh, but she pulled for him to sit. “You’re working for that place. You lied to me. I’m hearing stories of kidnapped children. Special children. Parents who-”

“I can change things, you see. Martin saw and he...he’s kept me. Oh, fuck. I can’t. I can’t.” Lucy covered her ears. Tried not to scream when tears fell. Fingers curled to jerk her chair closer to his so they were facing each other full on. Jim tried to be harder. Tried to steel himself.

“Lucy, I’ll goddamn arrest you if I...” He watched her sink down. Pulling for his hand to hold it desperately. Quaking.

She was crying so hard, she couldn’t speak. Head bowed in her open palm now.

Jim attempted to be cold. To push beyond her limits. To hurt her.

“Stop that.” He peered away. “Lucy. Stop crying!” All the fear she’d pent up poured out before him.

“I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you.” She managed. Sniffling harder with bloodshot eyes. “You won’t believe me.”

“Why don’t you give me a try?” Jim had a dangerous look. Leaning in close again to sit. One hand wrapped around her arm.

“Brenner saw my potential he... I can do things, Jim. Things others can’t do.” Lucy dropped her head. Not wanting to see his eyes when she said it. “I can change people. Make them feel things. It’s a sixth sense to me. I can sense these...pheromones others can’t and use them against people. They stole me and developed it and I did things. Bad things, Jim, *oh god*—”

“Okay, we’re going to the station if you want to play this shit with me.” Jim started yanking her up.

“No, Jim!” Lucy twisted and pulled. Feet skidding before Jim paused. Inhaled. Dropped to his knees in front of the fridge.

Lucy went very still there as he slipped from her. Confusion twisted his expression. Hands felt around as Lucy crouched to see him lean up against the counters. Near limp. Relaxed like he’d pumped himself with drugs. Blue eyes darting.

“I’m sorry, Jim, I didn’t want this for you.” Lucy settled next to him. Head on his shoulder. She rose to cup his face. “Now, you feel it.”

“Wh-What’d you do to me?” Eyelids fluttered. Drunken fingers pulled at her.

“It’ll wear off in a moment. I promise. Soothing someone. That’s easy. Not very harmful. Just feel me in your veins. See.” She smoothed his cheeks and straddled him to hold him close. “You didn’t believe it. You have to expand your perception if you’re going to beat this. That place experiments on innocent people and when others get in the way... We cut ties. They’ve had me in a net for most of my life and I can’t make up for...”

Lucy sniffled and felt something metal press into her ribs. Jim's shaken finger clicked the trigger ready. She came out to look. Saw his fatigued expression and calmed. Stopped crying to accept it.

"I've killed a lot of people with it. Maybe more than you in war and on the force. We're advanced soldiers. It's all the same. Especially for me when I can predict emotions. It leaves so little to chance." Lucy touched the barrel and brought it higher. "I suppose this is easier if your aim is true."

"I could do it." Felt like he was just telling himself that.

"Are you going to shoot me, Jim?" Lucy went stiff. Sat up on her knees and met his eyes. Didn't try to stop him. "Can you tell Mia that I'm so sorry? I wasn't enough. I hope my blood is worth something to you. I hope it's well spent." She braced for the bullet to rip into her body. Jim just stared. Shuddering. Crushed.

Some awareness fluttered back.

A tear rolled down his cheek.

Lucy thought of glass crashing. Jim's lips on hers. His arms pulling her close. The nearest thing to heaven.

And then he killed her with mere syllables.

"Did you *make* me love you?" Jim asked instead as a little boy would. Sounding too small. Like he might just die right there. Lucy's chest sunk with a gasp. Lips parted and she shed tears with him, head tilting. Barely able to reply.

"You love me?"

It all shattered. She offered that so innocently. So oblivious as if she hadn't known what love smelled like. That warm swell of cinnamon. And that it followed her through all this hell even still. Jim's teeth crushed and he began to really tremble.

He loved her all on his own.

What they had was real.

Jim Hopper crumbled with a hitching sob. Dropped the gun aside.

She tried to touch his face and got her wrists clamped again with an iron grip.

"You *fucking*-" The word cut. *Hate her. Just hate her.*

Unfortunately for Jim, hate made the heart grow fonder.

"I know." Lucy heard it even still. *Monster.*

"Not gonna let this be the end. Hear me?"

"They're gonna chase you, Jim."

"They can chase me. I'm going to Joyce. Gonna tell her everything. And I'm going to find Will, I'll tear that whole place apart if I have to." Jim pushed up, used the counter to support himself while Lucy stayed crouched there. "You're coming with me. You're going to tell us everything you know."

"They'll kill you."

"Not if I have something to bargain with." The gun lifted once more. Steady. "I'm not gonna hurt you and don't make me. Get up."

"And play prisoner for you? No."

"Not asking. Get the fuck up!"

Lucy rose to her feet. Black boots clicked the tile.

"If I force you to help me...suppose they can't do much about it. Can't blame you. I made you. Right? All the same." The barrel touched her chest. Lucy wiped her eyes. Shook her head. "Don't try anything."

"Will you hurt me if I do?" Lucy asked as Jim snatched the green lunchbox from the fridge and her purse with some emergency candy in it. Still a thoughtful ass even as he tried to hate her.

"I'm asking the questions. I don't want to hear anything else out of

your mouth right now.” Jim forced his eyes away from her as if she truly disgusted him, gestured to the door. Lucy straightened and took her items from him. Held them closer. Passed to go.

Out into the light.

Whatever that meant for her now.

** **

“Get out. Stay next to me. Don’t talk.” Jim was scribbling a note on some paper against his steering wheel. “Stay where I can see you at all times. You’re a means to an end now. That’s fucking all.” Salt in a bleeding wound.

"And after this ends? What then?"

"I'll give you one chance to leave Hawkins and never come back." He sealed the edges of his soul up. "Only thing you get for assisting. It's more than generous. Stay the hell out of my town and don't let me catch you. Now, be quiet."

"Think I'd use my abilities against you again, Jim?"

He ignored her and got out. Lucy swallowed. Following. Stayed at his right when he knocked on the Byers' door. Reverberating bangs.

"Go away, Lonnie!" Came a muffled voice on the other end. Jim kept up the pounding. "Seriously! I am gonna murder—" The door yanked back revealing Joyce with a hammer in hand, teeth bared. Jim reeled forward with a note to quiet her. Finger to his lips.

Joyce dropped the anger for confusion. Looking between them.

"What...? What?" Joyce stepped aside as Jim pushed in, grasping Lucy's elbow to pull her with.

Jim paused to get a good look at all the Christmas lights. The disaster that had become of her house in a few short days.

"Oh, Jesus." He exhaled, pointing Lucy to sit in a chair. "Don't you move." Joyce watched her friend avoid the stare. Hopper dropped the

note and gestured for silence again. Tediously, he began to undo lights. Flipping the house the same way he'd upturned his and then Lucy's.

"What's going...?" Joyce followed after him, peering from Lucy's hard expression.

Jim's breathing was racing by the time he got to the end of his long search. Christmas light bulbs sprinkled every surface. Panting, he removed his hat and fell into the chair next to Lucy.

"Okay," he puffed, "it should be okay, I mean...I can't guarantee it, but it should be okay."

"What the hell is going on, Hopper?" Joyce's hands went out, standing over him. "Lucy, where have you been?"

"I-"

"They bugged my place."

"What?" Joyce turned her attention back.

"They bugged my place." Jim pushed out, stronger. Almost frantic. "They put a microphone in the light. It's because I'm on to them and they know it. I don't know..."

Lucy clutched the arm rests. Eyes on a part of the wall that had been axed and sealed back up. Lingering over painted letters. What the hell had Joyce been up to?

"Who?" Joyce pressed.

"I thought they might be watching you, too--"

"Just her phone calls." Lucy offered, barely audible.

"-I don't know, the CIA, the NSA, Department of Energy... I don't know!" Hopper cut in.

"You gotta explain this to me, 'cause I am not--"

"We went to the morgue last night, Joyce." Jim stopped her again. Intent now.

"What?" Joyce sounded breathless.

"It wasn't him." Lucy found her voice again. Eyes watering as she turned to her friend.

"Will's body, it was a fake." Jim sat forward when Joyce's knees shook. The validation she'd sought was right here. Slowly, she crouched down and Jim leaned in to steady her. "You were right. The whole time, you were right."

Joyce gasped to hold his words. A smile shook her expression.

Finally.

"And I have more proof." He took Lucy's arm to tug with some purpose. "You're gonna start talking."

"Do we have the time?" Lucy's scrunched at him. Joyce felt the tension curl again.

"Oh yeah, we'll make all the time in the world. Start talking. From the beginning. Everything. You leave something out, and I'll--"

"You can't handle everything, Jim."

"Probably not. I don't care." Jim growled as Joyce stood.

"Hey, what's...?"

"She knows about it, Joyce. She's working with them. The whole time, she's been in with them. Hawkins Lab. Tell her." Jim let Lucy go, rougher than he meant, and sat back. "Talk."

Lucy struggled. Hard eyes like two pieces of coal on her lap. Joyce just stood there waiting.

"Is it true?"

"I..."

"Is it true?" Joyce repeated. Hotter.

"It..." Lucy barely glanced. "It's compli-"

A slap echoed. Joyce was shorter and smaller than Lucy, but she almost sent the woman out of her chair. Jim reeled forward to stop the another slap that was charging down.

"I trusted you. Will trusted you, too! My boys liked you." Joyce pushed off Hopper. "I told you things. We had dinner together. You sat at my table!"

"I didn't know this would happen!" Lucy touched her stinging cheek, starting to blush. Stared. A tear fell. "I didn't know."

"Of course, you did!" Joyce bent down, rasping now. "You just didn't know it'd be my kid. You worked for them."

"I had no choice."

"How long?"

"They got me early, I was only seventeen and s-so stupid."

"The breakdown?" Jim realized.

"It was all a cover."

"Keep talking." Hopper pressed Joyce to sit. "Lucy knows what happens if she tries anything." He turned. "Well?"

"I'll tell you everything I know. I can't say how high this goes. I don't have all the answers. Please. I didn't want this, but it happened." Lucy trembled. "...I'm gonna save them."

"You helped cause this!" Joyce was still heated.

"Joyce, we need to hear her out." Jim looked down, calming her. "Lucy, start talking."

"I was only seventeen when I walked into his office. Thought my life was changing for the better." Lucy fell back into her chair.

Sinking. "He lied to me. He ruined my world and I let him."

"Who?" Joyce pulled from Jim to stand over the shaken woman.

"Martin Brenner." Her head tilted. "I needed the money, I thought it was for a study. He's practically seduced me and I signed myself over."

"What's your relationship with Brenner?" Jim saw her eyes change and his own core churned over. Nausea followed.

"He has a way of making you open up and give in."

Yes, Lucy spun her whole tale. Wonder and despair and more despair.

Didn't cry, not too much. Worked through history. Tried to answer questions, even if she didn't have the answer. And there were many. Mia. Terry. Logan. Eleven.

"Terry Ives sued Brenner."

"They put her to rest after torturing her to keep her quiet. She lives with her sister. I don't know the city she's in, they'll likely prefer her still in Indiana. I don't know what she knows still or how her health is. They ruined her like many others. I don't even know about her daughter, only that she's alive."

"All this time, I've been chasing Will..." Jim's eyes dawned with realization. "I've been looking for some other kid."

"I can't find her and if I do, the lab will get her back. They watch me." Lucy scratched at her neck. Felt skin toughening where little prickly scars were. "I tried to help, I did. Brenner still has a hold on me. And he has Mia."

"All that time." Joyce came to her. Took her hand to turn it over and see the tattoo. A moment of contemplation before she spoke. Gentler. "It wasn't your fault."

"It was. All of this-"

"It would have still happened." Joyce frowned. Let her go. Lucy rubbed her eyes, leaning forward. It was a strange thing to hear. Something she'd been waiting for. It cracked a distant floodgate.

"I think...I saw Will. In that place...that place you saw. I smelt him, he smells like this house. Like the maple syrup and pancake breakfast he likes to eat in the morning. Fresh paper and crayons. Like the woods. Nature. I don't know. Something's changing in me." Lucy pressed both hands to her chest. Took in some air. They could only watch her. "God, I know I sound crazy."

"Think you can pick up his scent?" Jim spoke for the first time. First time since she revealed the nature of her relationship to Brenner. He still looked wounded. As if he wasn't trying to blame her.

Some things were just a little bit inevitable. Like love and like pain.

"Not sure if it works that way. It's...flashes. Like that place touched me and left an impression. You saw it and...it makes you feel things." Lucy's gaze lifted to both of them. "I can't smell it anymore."

"And you say you can...smell emotions." Joyce produced as the family dog wandered around the corner.

"It's-"

"We know it's complicated, why don't you-?"

The dog whined. Plopped over on his bed.

Lucy lifted a hand to catch blood running to her lip.

"What did you do?"

"Calmed him. He's afraid of me." Lucy plucked a tissue when Jim put the box by her. Joyce surveyed her dog. Sighed. "Believe me?"

"I might after the week I've had." Joyce stood up.

"You spoke to Will in the lights?"

"I told him to hide, I can't get anything now. So, Terry's daughter..."

"I don't have answers for Eleven...that place. Brenner keeps the worst from me. If you believe it. I'm a tool to him, same as the others. Everything with Hawkins Lab is need to know. I run...clean up. Mia works with the kids, we had a silent arrangement to protect the girl and it forced us apart. I don't even understand what she can do or how he's used her."

"You know this guy better than anyone." Jim was on his feet. "You have to know more."

"The person who can answer the rest has been trapped under that lab since the sixties." Lucy got hard. "And I'm going to get her out. Even if she really does hate me now. I want her to know her sister is still in here somewhere alive."

"We'll get Mia out." He promised Lucy that. Joyce paced around, lit up a cigarette so he followed. "Stay right here."

"Still your prisoner." Lucy's lip quirked when they went off. Still chattering about what Jim had seen up close. Going over the evidence a thousand more times. Still missing pieces. The dog rolled over and snored as Lucy stood to see the black letters painted upon the wall.

Jim returned in a hurry, plucking up his hat from the table.

"We're leaving." He grabbed an irritated Lucy by the elbow as Joyce snatched up her jacket behind them. "Going to find Terry today."

"I have to eat something soon." Lucy complained on their way to his car. "It's been hours."

"Back seat. You'll eat what I order you and like it. Go." Jim didn't look at her when he pointed. Lucy stared. Wondered if anything she did would bring him back. Blue eyes turned to watch her walk the dead grass. Wind echoed into crunching leaves. Caused tree branches to sway and click together.

For a moment, Jim thought even the trees were drooping lower as

Lucy passed them. Shriveling to rot. Empathetic to her plight.

He opened his mouth to speak to her before the door shut. Behind him, Joyce hurried out and stuffed the house keys into her pocket.

"I left a note for Jonathan." She passed. "We should take my car. It'll look weird if they catch you driving out of town in a marked vehicle. Don't we wanna be under the radar, Hop?" Joyce was stepping on a cigarette and Jim rolled his eyes, motioning for Lucy to grab her things with two fingers. "Can we trust her?"

"No." Jim shook his head. Cold. "But, right now, we have to."

"Hop. Come on. We know her, we grew up with little Lucy Garland. Mia's baby sister who was always sitting beneath that same weeping willow watching the world move on without her. Always playing catch up even if she was just pretending."

"She still lied." *To me.* Jim didn't add that.

"I know that. I do. I'm still upset, but she was used like everyone else. These people hurt my Will and they hurt Lucy, too. You'll have to look at her eventually. She was in this alone." Joyce pressed her lips, holding herself tight. "Maybe, we can make sure the kids after won't be."

Jim's stony expression twitched before he reached for her keys.

"I'm driving." He swallowed and went to the little car.

Lucy got out of the truck and locked it. Crossed to follow the pair of sleuths. Wordlessly slid in back before they grabbed some drive thru and made their way out of town.

Hopper stopped at a lone payphone to get some help from his old cop buddies in the big city.

"This thing you do...does it hurt?" Joyce turned her head, surprising the woman behind her.

"Sometimes." Lucy paused. "Joyce, I... Our friendship was more important to me than I can ever... I'm going to do everything I can to

fight this for Will. And I'm sorry.”

“I'm...sorry I hit you. I've never... Well, I might have tried to take a swing at Lonnie once.” Joyce looked ahead. “He was drunk. Caught Will drawing and tore the picture up. Called him a... I could have ripped his head off right there and I didn't. That was at least two years before we divorced.... Sometimes there isn't an easy way out.”

Lucy only gave her a nod. Eyes turned from Joyce to see Jim making his way back to the car.

Terry Ives awaited. Not the person she was by any means. That much was certain. There was hope something slipped free within the long years. Lucy hadn't known what became of her.

The past stayed still in wait for Lucy. Flooding out that ethereal rift beneath the earth.

Fragments of all of us that would twist into something brand new. Maybe until nothing was really left. Lucy recalled them to herself.

A New Years kiss. Hands clasp at the drive in. Laughter over messy meals. Winning jingles to underscore growing smiles. And so forth. And so forth. Total revelation that something as silly as staying in past your alarm could be so beautiful. Lucy tried to catch these memories like fresh snowflakes that would melt upon contact with skin.

Maybe it was a terrible thought. She hoped Jim would hold onto his anger. Hoped he might keep her around to end her life later for all that she'd done. Feel something strong toward her so these shattered memories would be kept alive just behind their neon hearts.

Hoped that her last breaths given to this world echoed out with one flicker of redemption. One flame to revive her long dead fires.

For that little girl who climbed trees and tried to be something better through all of this.

What Lucy Garland wouldn't give to recognize her again.

Just once would be enough.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all, thanks you so much for reading and as always, I'd love to hear from you below or on my tumblr Alias-B :)

21. Becomes The Color

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello everyone! This season is ticking by :) Thanks for clicking in. Jim, Joyce, and Lucy meet with Terry Ives hoping for answers. Hopper faces his conflicting feelings before The Party starts to come together while the mystery deepens. TW: SMUT. Light violence. Vaguely unsettling, monster imagery.

“Does the sister know your face?”

“Never met her.” Lucy stared aside from Jim. Joyce could have cut the tension between them with a butter knife.

“Terry’s not going to run when she sees you, is she?” Jim had parked, turning. Lucy flamed at him.

“No. We were friends. Almost. Mia helped her.” Lucy swallowed. “She did her best. I turned aside and helped her too late and got her tortured.”

Hopper opened his mouth to nurture. Stopped.

“Well, let us ask the questions in there. You’ve done enough.” Jim slammed his door getting out. Lucy followed. Wincing. Saw Jim’s back tense and relax. He said nothing.

Lucy realized she spent too much time looking at the back of his skull wondering what was in it. Hopper offered her the same courtesy, but then never said enough. Both of them. Joyce trailed after him and Lucy stepped up behind, head bowed.

Jim smelled of burnt rubber. Of bleach. Of cinnamon.

There wasn’t an apathetic bone left in him and maybe he resented that most.

His knuckles rapped the door a couple times. Old house, worn down. Covered in lush vines and shrubbery. Hidden away from the

world. A mousy head of short, sandy curls poked out near the window before the door opened.

“Can I help you?” Becky Ives had a sort of plain, pretty face. Maybe the same touch of cynicism for the world Joyce clung to.

“Hi, we’re looking for Terry Ives.” Jim began. “Does she live here?”

“Who’s asking?” A protective guard rose.

“The Hawkins Chief of Police.” Jim flashed his badge. Becky eyed them with suspicion, arms crossing.

“And you want to talk to my sister?”

“Well, if your sister’s Terry Ives, then, yeah...we do.” Jim replied with Joyce silently pleading next to him.

“Okay, well, you can come in,” she brought the door back, “but if you want Terry to tell you anything, you’re a few years too late.”

Lucy smelt it at that moment. Hopelessness. That awful rot. She so wanted to believe something in Terry was left over.

“Name’s Becky. The older sister.” She seemed tired as she led them inside. Jim pulled his hat off. Tiny place. Almost cramped, almost cozy. Lucy held herself like she might break something. A TV played on in the distance. Some peppy game show.

Around the corner, Lucy saw her. A shell. Terry Ives was a stunning woman. Power and gleam. Shiny blond hair. Dressed well. But, this... This shell rocking in a chair. Broken and vacant. Wearing a cotton nightgown and cardigan with her limp hair pulled back.

It wasn’t the Terry that Lucy recalled. That fighter who stood like Mia did. Sturdy and grounded. No, she was floating.

“Hello. My name is Joyce Byers.” Joyce worked up the nerve to approach. Terry seemed to hear her speak, head turning. “Uh, this is Hopper.” She gestured. “And Lucy.”

Terry barely met Lucy’s eyes. Something flashed. A fallen star. And

it died. She seemed to not even recognize her. Not really.

Jim noticed it too. And it told him everything he needed to know.

“We drove over from Hawkins.” Joyce continued while Becky parked herself against a desk. “Um, you see, my son...he’s been missing for almost a week now and we were wondering if we could talk to you about your daughter, Jane?”

That struck something in Terry. Her breath caught. Eyes closing and opening.

“If there’s anything that you could tell us about when she was taken...”

“What was your relationship with Dr. Brenner?” Jim added, nervously smoothing his hat out. “You guys keep in touch?”

Nothing. Terry just lingered there. Barely present.

“This is, uh...this is him.” Joyce unfolded an old flyer and came closer. Terry dropped her eyes to see it. “This is Will. You may have seen him on the news.”

A tear fell down Terry’s cheek. Joyce was still speaking as Jim pulled Becky aside.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“I told you, you’re wasting your time.” She shook her head. One finger rubbed under her own eye. She had to be the strong sister now. That burns.

Lucy wondered if she’d been holding her breath this entire time.

Joyce turned to see them with a sobered expression so Becky gestured.

“Terry, we’ll let you get back to your shows. This way, maybe I can help.” She plucked a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket. Joyce followed first, leaving Hopper to linger as Lucy came to Terry. She knelt down when Becky had gone into the other room.

“Terry.” Lucy touched her hand. Felt the rocking still. “You remember me? Lucy. Mia’s little sister.”

Bright eyes pointed on her. Narrowing.

“I’m gonna save Mia soon. I’m gonna free her and the others. Jane. She’s alive. Mia watched over her and I’ll save her too. I promise... I’ll keep that promise and the one I made to you. I’ll tell your little girl everything.”

Terry breathed in, looking fluttered. Lucy’s lip wobbled before she stood and sniffled to see Jim still there watching. Unable to stand it any longer, she pushed around him and headed for the door.

“Hey.” Jim kept his voice low. “You’re-”

“I wanted to be strong, but I...I’m not Mia.” Lucy wiped her cheek. “I can’t be in this house anymore. The smell. Oh, god...it’s too much. I’m going to the car. Go get your pre-recorded answers and I’ll be outside. Where the fuck can I run to, Jim?” She ripped out of his grasp and continued on. Hopper didn’t grab her but followed, whispered as Joyce started the conversation in the other room.

“You think she’s one of them? The sister. Doesn’t seem angry.”

Lucy looked almost offended. Disgusted.

“She’s hurt and she’s mourning and she’s fucking furious. In this tomb with that shell.” Lucy tremored. “She’s just hiding it.”

“Why?” Jim pressed at the doorway. Lucy sucked in some air.

“She’s lost her sister.”

The door opened and shut. Lucy barely made it to the car to brace herself there. Sputtering to breathe again, holding a thin jacket too close.

She could prove Jim wrong by saving them. All of them. Eleven and Mia too. Prove to Mia that her sister was still alive here and fighting. It was the only thing she’d sought after these long years. Mia’s waiting arms. Her fight. Her admiration. Her love.

And it's what kept Lucy's soul alive.

** ** *

Mia Garland never considered herself a brave girl.

Bitchy. Considerate. Adventurous. A rebel. She snuck out as a teen and still maintained perfect grades. Never bullied. Set an example.

And Lucy looked at her sister as if she was the North Star. It was a lot to live up to, especially when she got sick. But, Mia did her best.

Never resented Lucy in truth.

The passing years brought a better understanding for her sister, in fact. Routines.

Mia tried not to get lost in this one. The day to day trapping of Hawkins Lab. She climbed ranks. Stayed out of the way. Set an example still. Impressed them with her coldness that was hiding a swell of fire.

Got to know these people. Coworkers and subjects alike. Heard stories of how Lucy had grown. Pretended life and death were of little consequence.

Brenner wanted answers and results. He wanted growth. Lucy gave him such hope and it was Mia's job to keep that alive. Keep him docile so he could be digested by his own ego. Pretending to let Lucy go was the hardest thing she'd ever done. All the while her sister's eyes burned and melted souls down to size.

Mia always knew her baby sister had that effect. She could turn their grumpiest neighbors into softies with a smile and a couple taps of piano keys. Her ability was gentle empathy and righteous compassion.

Brenner said once to Mia that specific brand of bloodied passion was what made Lucy a great killer. He wasn't wrong.

Lucy held a power in her heart long before Brenner caught her in a net and taught her to channel it. These poor sisters torn apart who

longed to ravage justice like a disease. Who understood that blood and fire and even rot weren't all bad. Annihilation can mean evolution and rebirth.

Now if Mia wanted to know Lucy, she could just read her files when no one was watching. Wistful as they made her. Never afraid.

That girl was in there somewhere. That budding brat who followed her sister every day and wore Mia's hand-me-downs. Secretly longing to be her sister in all actuality.

But, Lucy was afraid of her chaos and her power. Mia's goal would be to shatter that.

Maybe as a bite at forgiveness. For letting Lucy think she was alone. Mia always new Lucy was the best in their family, she was born with their strongest qualities.

Mother's dreams. Father's compassion. Mia's fight. Something rare that was also all her own. This ability to see every color. Love every color. Become every color.

It was possible Lucy always had the ability to surround herself in pheromones that changed the people around her. Made them loyal and brave.

Mia wouldn't call it pheromones. It was just Lucy. Just the good person she is that touched others.

Logan understood that from the first and he loved her and it's why he died for her. He'd made peace with it long before the end.

Lucy Garland is the beginning and end of this. The soul big enough to carry it away. She was worth it and she was good despite the potential for great evil that always hide behind her heart to weave lies.

And Lucy would have to believe that one day, or else the lab wins. Mia knew her sister best and distance wouldn't change that. This horrid act they both put on wouldn't change that.

Mia was the one behind stone and glass and she never felt locked

up here. Not after the long years of helping others thrive. Spiting Brenner. Studying and healing in her way. She still lived. So there was only one promise left.

"I'm gonna save you, Lucy," Mia decided this long ago, "just hold on a little longer."

** ** *

"Her story," Joyce spoke as they they left the house, "it matches up to Lucy's."

"I know that." Jim gruffed, making a beeline to Lucy perking up, pressed into the car. "That woman. Is she like you? Can she do things?"

"Most likely, I believe it's hereditary in some way. Nothing major in Terry manifested that we knew of. Except the girl." Lucy stood taller. Fingers dug into her arms.

"They think Jane was a miscarriage." Joyce had added.

"Of course, they do. Brenner set it all up. He's quite prepared. He walked out of that hospital with her baby in his arms like she was a newborn purebred." Lucy was grabbed by the elbow. Jim seized her forward. Not violently. But, with enough force that she hissed at him, skidding a little over gravel. "It's the truth!"

"Hopper, come on!" Joyce pushed at his arm.

"Lucy, I swear to god, if I find out-"

"Will is still missing." Joyce slapped between them. Lucy was glaring and Jim paused to see his friend lose some strength. "Terry never found her daughter."

"But, she's out there and so is Will." Lucy slowed to comfort her.

"We're gonna find him. I'm gonna find him." Jim asserted next. "We have a long drive back and we all need rest. Food and a motel, we can touch base with the kids. Lucy...do you think Mia would have told this girl your name? Maybe had her try to find you?"

“Too dangerous, they visit me. And they’d know Mia helped her.” Lucy shook her head.

“And...what if you’re not home?”

“I’m not supposed to leave Hawkins, they’ll start a search when they realize I’m gone. But, the little girl is the priority to that lab. We have to find her first now.” The fear echoed through her eyes and Jim softened at it. “And Will. Mia, too. I just want to save my sister. She needs me. This is my chance to finally save her.” After so many years of feeling like a failure.

“We’ll help her escape. They won’t hurt Mia.” He let Lucy slip away. Watched her hold herself so tight.

“Yes, they will. She’s played the part, but they still hurt us.” Lucy sniffled, head shaking. “Mia thinks I’m lost to them. She thinks I won’t fight for her when she’s fought all this time because she was always the brave one. I can save her. Prove to her that I’m strong too, that I won’t go silently.”

Both of them let her release her deepest thoughts.

“I never wanted to play this game with Martin, I just wanted to save my sister. I need her to believe me.”

“Lucy, Mia knows you.” Joyce shifted to face her and Jim agreed.

“You’re both getting out of this.”

“Sometimes a tide rolls in,” Lucy confessed against the autumn breeze, “and you can’t stop it.”

** ** *

Neon lights always made cheap motels a red, ethereal place. Made of cherry and lacquer. Horrible prints in cramped rooms. Just made you want to fight and fuck.

They got the last two. Joyce took one and Jim was dead intent on watching Lucy. So, they took the other. Frogs and crickets underscored the rough space around the lot. Halfway home.

“You don’t need to watch me piss too, do you, Jim?” Lucy started unbuttoning her gold blouse. The sarcasm jabbed him, but he didn’t reply. Looked aside to turn the TV on and unpack some gas station snacks for dinner. Soda. Diet for Lucy. Dry sandwiches. Beef jerky. Red licorice.

Lucy stared at Jim. Kept undressing with her eyes fixed until he looked at her naked body. Scrunching and startled.

“Stop that.”

“Nothing is happening, James,” Lucy’s voice dipped while she dropped her bra aside, “so nothing can stop.”

Haunted, she turned to go into the bathroom. Flicking her hair on the way in. The knob was broken and didn’t shut properly. Water poured. Lukewarm and beating the tub.

Lucy stepped under it. Felt the heat start to kick in until steam filled the space. Black hair was brushing almost past her shoulders now. Growing without a proper haircut the last few months. The natural light curls and waves began to melt back into it. Little comforts. She tilted her face toward the spray. Let it baptize her.

A hand ripped the shower curtain aside. Jim, nude and stony at her. His broad chest sank with a breath. Lucy spun. Not shocked at all. Hands smoothing over her slicked flesh.

“I’m not doing this to you. If you wondered. This is all you.” Her expression tilted down as he stepped in. Eyes lifting in a way that was almost menacing to match him.

“You did plenty to me,” Jim let his next exhale flutter, “*Lucretia*. But, not that. I know.”

“Smell like that cologne I bought you for your birthday. I was just glad you weren’t wearing something silly that had a ship on the bottle anymore.” Lucy made the bold choice to step into his space. Peered out from behind her thick lashes. “Smell burnt too. And sweet. How conflicting.”

Jim’s fists clenched as she kissed his neck. Water misting them

both.

“I don’t want you to hate me, Jim,” Lucy touched his chest and felt the heart race, “I don’t think I can handle it.”

“You know I don’t hate you, Luce.” Jim stopped her when she tried to drop to her knees. Use her body to atone. “You *know*. You know I never could.”

Worse, he loved her. Eyes locked. Fingers curled around her elbows.

“You want to.” She shuddered. Burst. “Jim Hopper, I lo-”

His mouth claimed her. Swallowed the words because he couldn’t bear to hear them. Not now. Not while he was still upset and wounded. Not while he tried to push that aside to feel her against him. As if one kiss could wash it all away. Get rid of the lab and Brenner and this black hole that seemed to consume goodhearted people who had seen too much evil.

Lucy wrapped herself around him. Tried to hide under his flesh. Seep into the marrow as if she hadn’t already made a home there. Nestled behind his heart that was bright ruby and beating. Pumping life into tired veins that didn’t always want to go forth.

Jim spread her open. Thumbed her clit and told her she was all his. His to pleasure. His to consume. Lucy so wanted to be his. Totally and completely.

She buried her face into his neck. Bit down so hard that Jim winced before he began to fuck her into the tiles. Damp hair fell over his brow.

Soaked bodies moving around steam and lust. Red welts rose on his skin when her nails scratched. She pressed back, bucking to meet him. Desperate. Near tears. Euphoric.

Jim watched her breasts bounce. Kissed them and started to touch her again. Deliberate circles until she was quaking there. So beautiful. His. Jim couldn’t stop. Drove into her harder. Still stroking. Mouth on her neck. Whispering for her to let go again.

Lucy felt she had no choice. Cried out louder and gushed. Spasming with another climax that shook her entire frame apart. Gripped him so tight until he followed soon after. Jim sagged into her neck, still holding her up as she pet his hair back and placed delicate kisses upon his crown and temples.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you, Jim Hopper.

I always have and I always will.

Lucy tried not to weep. Just kept kissing him until he let her down on trembling legs. Jim thumbed a droplet of water from her lips. Cupped her jaw to taste her.

Neither could speak. Just finished the shower in silence together, shifting about under the spray. Jim got out first and Lucy thought she'd collapse there. By sheer force, she finished washing and got out wrapped in rough terry cloth.

Hopper left the room. Probably to see Joyce and be away from Lucy's eyes that would melt him. A shiver ran her spine, but she took her shot and massaged the area. Ate a dry sandwich and stole some licorice. When it was apparent Jim was stalling, Lucy fell into bed. Tucked herself at the edge and listened for the TV to drone.

She tried to stay awake, but sleep stole her regardless. Lucy dreamed deep. Dreamed she was on all fours charging like a beastly tiger through a forest of rot.

Dreaming of blood pouring to fill the spaces around her and the smell. The fucking smell of it enticed her to pieces. The more blood that poured, the closer to hopelessness. Sadness and anger get washed away for death.

"Nancy!"

"Jonathan!"

Lucy perked. Wanted to run and smash the fight from desperate souls. Tear flesh only because she could. Stopped dead.

This wasn't her. What was she doing? Enjoying the thrill of a hunt. Enjoying the sheer power of being on the opposite end for the first time. Enjoying the suffering simply because it wasn't her.

So she ran. Further away toward a crack of light. Pounding to tear into another world where a red light beamed on and off. Lucy saw humans beyond the veil. Soldiers and scientists. Racing all directions behind glass. Sounding alarms as the breach cracked higher. Bleeding more into the room to rot it. She came to a window and didn't see the reflection of a monster.

Only herself. Was there a difference?

Time slowed. She caught a woman pressed to the corner and touched the window.

"Mia!" Lucy tried to call out. Unheard. She sagged. "Mia!"

The echoes seemed to resonate. Mia pushed past her coworkers. Came to see the monster bow its head.

"Lucy..." She spread her hand against the glass where the claws lie.

"Mia." Lucy cried out. "Can you hear me?" It seemed to echo out of the gate. A great voice that only Mia Garland could hear. "I'm coming, Mia! I'll save you! I promise, you'll be free again! You have to get out of this, if anyone can survive out here, it's you. It was never me. This isn't my story."

Lucy wept there against the glass.

"Lucy..." Mia gasped out at the lights. Reflecting within her dark eyes. "Lucy, you have to let go. Just let it all go! It's okay."

Soldiers began to pull doctors from the room. Grabbing her by the arms. Lucy roared. The breach poured wider. Framing her silhouette in hellfire. She started to claw and run again. Back into the rot. Unable to escape this sickly skin.

Into the tear where pain erupted. The blinking dead lights alone main street droned. Her old scar burned low in her stomach. Pressure built followed by nasty squelching. Something ripped out from her body. Vines crawled over the streets of rotting Hawkins. Plunging deep into the earth. This rot was alive and well.

Lucy howled at the moonless sky. Felt a thousand births tear from her flesh. Her useless parts that had been sliced to shreds. Perfectly good eggs she'd never use even if she had the proclivity for motherhood once too long ago.

The vines and spores grew around her. Hundreds of nests for the eggs that started to grow and glow in tune. Lucy thought she heard the distant tune of *Ave Maria* when the world slowed.

Circled around her were too many dead she'd collected. Lights for their eyes like they saw the shine within her soul reflected. Scents and emotions she felt scar her heart. Lucy screamed again and shot up in bed, naked and terrified.

A cold sweat slicked as Jim shook her back to life. Lucy tore from him and tumbled out into the chilled room. Smacked against the wall and cowered. Jim ripped up to follow, hands out as if to soothe her.

"Hey, hey! You're just dreaming." Jim took her shoulders with wide eyes. Betraying his own fear and trauma. "Lucy, you gotta breathe."

She heaved and hitched to sob instead.

"Jim." She felt around his skin to ensure it was real. "Jim."

"Yeah, I got you. Come here, back into bed." Arms lifted her up. Reminded her that she was frail. Lucy clung when he allowed it. Stiff and warm.

"Jim!" Lucy tremored. "Jim, I'm the monster." She kept saying it in chants as he knelt on the bed.

"No," he touched his lips to her crown and inhaled, "you're not, Lucy."

"You don't believe that yet."

"I know it's true, even if I'm fucking furious with you." He decided. "Only going to try to hate you for a little bit longer."

"I guess I owe you that much." Lucy shook in his arms. Naked bodies wrapped together. "I'll make it up to you, I'll save them." She met his eyes and looked a great deal unsettling. Not fully here. Dreaming. "I'm gonna show you and Mia. I will. I'll save them."

"I know," Jim soothed, "I do." Blue eyes peered elsewhere.

Lucy wanted to say more and closed her lips. Curled up in his arms and let him rock her. Let him shelter her from dreams and truths that were now bleeding together.

** **

They didn't speak the next morning. Just freshened up and dressed. Jim left again to turn the keys in and meet Joyce. Lucy emerged and looked out at a field of corn beyond the motel. Stretching all directions. Recalled tearing over the land as if she wasn't a sickly thing. Adrenaline and sheer will pumping. A magical feeling.

"Lucy!" Joyce called. "We have a problem, we gotta go!"

"What is it?" Lucy hurried toward the car to get in.

"It's Jonathan." Joyce took the wheel before Jim could fight her on it. "We need to get back to Hawkins."

Lucy wondered about running into the corn field as they skidded off. The shackles of Hawkins' welcome sign materialized in the distance. Joyce tore into the station ready to fight every officer in there when she saw her teenage son in handcuffs sitting next to Nancy Wheeler. Lucy hurried up behind her and saw them together. Recalled the voices from her dream and felt a wave of nausea.

"I'll be back," she touched Jim's back and hurried off. Puked sludge into a cramped toilet stall.

Frankly, her body ached like she'd run a marathon. Cold water helped perk her up enough to emerge in the commotion. Jonathan shoving up to follow Jim into his office. Nancy plucked up a box of

hunting supplies to follow with Joyce. Lucy groaned and stole a soda from the fridge before going in. She locked the door and came to the box.

“...What’s all this?” She set her can aside after one gulp.

“Monster hunting.” Nancy offered slowly. Lucy stole Jim’s desk chair while he and Joyce gathered in front of it. Waiting for an explanation.

Pieces of the story came together. They all had a part. There was this moment Lucy was glad.

She didn’t feel alone in this any longer. Jonathan and Nancy spun a tale complete with photos. Jim offered one to Lucy behind him and she shot up. The unmistakable form of the monster. Powerful and elongated.

“It’s like a man,” Jonathan explained, “only-”

“It doesn’t have a face.” Lucy finished, easing back down.

“You’ve seen it?” Nancy had gasped so Lucy flashed the scratched skin over her collar. Jim narrowed.

“You neglected that.”

“I figured you had enough to wrap your brain around.” She watched the teens appear confused. “Story for another time, maybe when we get further...you said blood draws this in?”

That made sense.

Where there’s blood, there’s usually fear too.

“It’s just a theory.” Nancy shook her head and sighed. Joyce jolted up and pulled Jonathan out to scold him. Such a mother. “You don’t look so hot, Miss Garland.”

“Lucy’s fine, Nancy. I’m not feeling my best these days.” She itched her puckering scars through the gold shirt. Another commotion sprang and Jim groaned, getting up to handle it. They felt the tension

easily. “Did...you and Hopper fight or something?”

“Something like that.” Lucy sat back. “You’d think dating would be easier as an adult.”

“And I had my hopes up.” Nancy pressed her lips and Lucy plucked up another photo. “If you saw that thing up close... How did you get away?”

“That’s just it,” came a quiet utter, “I’m not sure I did.”

** ** *

“You think Mike and his friends found her?” Lucy trailed after Jim as he grabbed his hat and coat. A whirlwind of information and a chance encounter with a mother and her bully son gave them a clue. “It’s all coming together, isn’t it?”

“We’ll see when we find them.” He turned. “Brenner’s men, they’ll be looking for you too.”

“I know that.” Lucy stood taller. “I think I’m just trying to do what I know Mia would.”

“Could try trusting yourself again too, Luce.” Jim touched her back to guide her out of the office. Back to Joyce’s car where they found Mike’s house overrun with Hawkins Labs goons. Another trip to Joyce’s in hope of locating the kids had them all gathered around a walkie in Will’s room.

“You try.” Joyce turned it up and Nancy sighed.

“Mike, are you there?” She attempted several times with no avail. All of them clasped their hands in wait. “Mike?”

No response.

Jim took it and got stern.

“Listen, kid, this is the Chief. If you’re there, pick up. We know you’re in trouble and we know about the girl. We can protect you, we can help you, but you gotta pick up. Are you there? Do you copy?”

Over.”

Nothing still. Jim sighed and set it down, facing the group.

“Anybody got any other ideas?” Looks were exchanged and then a voice cut through static.

“Yeah, I copy.” Mike. “I’m here. We’re here.”

“Tell us where you are,” Jim snatched the walkie, “I’ll come get you.” He was already marching out.

“I’m coming with you.” Lucy grabbed his arm once he got the location. Jim shoved his hat back on with some fury building.

“You think Brenner’s men won’t close in also? It’s too dangerous.” He replied dismissively.

“I’m the dangerous one, Jim. I have to do this, I’ll prove it to you.” She said fiercer.

“I don’t know if you can!” Hopper burst. The room froze over and Lucy didn’t lose her fight even if that hurt her profoundly. He could barely look at her.

“You can’t stop me from trying. I know what you’d give for a chance, Jim, and this is mine. You need me. I need this. I’m going.” Lucy shoved in front of him. “You may not believe in me and that’s fine, I’ll prove it to you.” He stared at her. Hard. “Let me try.”

“I’ll stay, let her go.” Joyce offered, earning looks from Nancy and Jonathan. “Go, it’ll get dark soon.”

“Fine.” Jim marched out with Lucy behind him, still dressed in a fucking skirt and gold blouse. Out of place boots without heels. Hair shifting almost violently into the wind. They swerved down the street toward the other side of Hawkins. An old scrap yard covered in old cars and buses, rusting in the weeds.

“They’re already here. Brenner’s agents.” Lucy sniffed the air when she got out. Jim pulled his gun at the ready and curled one arm around her.

“Stay behind me.” He gave an order as they crept through the trees. His head motioned toward the old bus Mike described. Bodies ducking behind a car to see agents wandering the lot below. Jim pulled Lucy along with him. Behind the bus just as one man opened it and Jim’s gun cracked the back of his head.

“Hey!” Two more agents noticed them and Jim readied to fight before they dropped. Lucy sniffled loudly behind him and he shot her a look.

“Lavender. It’s magic, so they say. Little like belladonna.” She watched him pass to climb in and see the kids huddled together hiding.

“Alright, let’s go.” He scanned them. Noticed a skinny girl with no hair. Skittish like a bird. Almost similar to who Lucy used to be. None of them moved. “Let’s go!” Little feet scrambled, grabbing bags to race off the bus.

“Miss Garland!” Dustin beamed his biggest grin upon seeing her. Jim called out as three more cars pulled up in the distance. Seven agents hurrying out as Lucy shielded Lucas and Dustin. Jim lurched in front of them all before Lucy grabbed his arm. Blood already pouring out her nose when he turned to see her expression sag.

The men dropped one by one like dying flies into a great sleep.

Lucy tipped forward into Jim with Dustin still latched to her wrist.

“Whoa, hey, hey. Easy.” Jim looked around. Brought Lucy to the dry grass.

“El, was that you?” Mike had asked and Lucy lifted her face to the children. Earned matching gasps and glimpsed Eleven’s face at last. El shook her head and looked on with huge eyes, recognizing her.

A hand shot out and Lucy choked. Grasped blinding at her neck.

“El, stop! She’s a friend!” Dustin pushed between them.

“She’s with Papa.” El shook on her feet. Tried to be hard when her own blood dripped. “Bad. Bad.”

“Stop it!” Lucas’s shout ceased it so Lucy gasped and coughed. Grasping at Jim’s coat and dead grass. He watched the emerald green of it seem to decay under her. Inching further until a cold wind blew.

“You know her?” Mike had El’s hand. Lucy’s eyes lifted again and they realized it.

“She was there, too. She’s like El.” Dustin seemed happy when he said that. Like maybe El wasn’t alone. Lucy only frowned.

“I can explain. Please. El...” She stumbled up and El backed away from her, prompting Lucy to still. Unsure if she should call her Jane. “My sister. Mia Garland. You know her. She’s a doctor, they force her to work there.”

El responded to that.

“Nice.” She said. “Nice lady. Except when they call her Nurse.”

“Y-Yes.” Lucy gasped with tears. Hands crossed to touch her heart. “That’s my big sister. We tried to protect you, I wish I had time to explain it.”

“Papa’s friend. He kissed you. Like Cinderella. I’ve seen you with him. You don’t always see me. He said he was your prince and you were his princess.”

The boys made disgusted sounds behind them as Jim came to hold Lucy up. It made her nauseous that Brenner had spoken about her to Eleven.

“We gotta go now.”

“Not Papa’s friend. I pretend. I pretend to stay safe. So he doesn’t hurt people. Do you understand that? Mia and I both pretend. I’m like you, Eleven, you’re not alone.” It felt like she’d waited eons to give such words. Lucy offered her wrist and El craned to see the zeros. The boys rushed in wonder.

“You really have powers, too? Can you move stuff like El?” Lucas piped up.

“Look, we can explain all this when we get back.” Jim started to tug at Lucy’s arm and shifted toward El carefully. This frightened girl before him.

Her frame and baldness brought him back to little Sara and her pleading eyes. Jim recalled she hadn’t been afraid of the end. Maybe she didn’t understand that soon she would go to sleep and not wake.

Eleven seemed to fully understand life and death. It jarred him to pieces.

“We’re friends. We’re going to help you, keep you safe from Brenner.” Jim paused and corrected himself. “Papa.”

El peered at Lucy again. Relaxed.

“It’s okay, El.” Mike came to her side. Stuck there. “Let’s go.”

Lucy wiped her nose upon her sleeve so they trekked back. Jim pushed an arm around Lucy to keep her walking right.

“All this time?” Dustin came around with a bright smile crinkling his eyes. “You really are a witch, huh.”

"I suppose so."

Lucy couldn’t help but laugh.

Sometimes that’s all a person could do when facing the end.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much! Party is starting to merge and I finally get to write some El into the fic! Stay and chat with me below or on my tumblr, Alias-B.

I'm going to just put the warning here for the next two chapters also. They're both incredibly heavy so just be forewarned when clicking into it. I'll tag triggers as needed, but it was truly the hardest content I've had to write since I started writing ST. Thanks xoxo

22. Ave Maria

Notes for the Chapter:

I really struggled over this chapter, clear as it was. The S1 battle commences for our heroes. I feel almost ill finally posting it, but I'm so proud of how far this fic has come and how far it's still going. Thank you guys so much for giving time to this story and hold onto a little hope for me and Lucy. Love you all! PLEASE read the triggers, this chapter is graphic. TW: Major gore and graphic violence. Self mutilation. Monsters. Abuse. Body horror. Death.

“Don’t tell me you’ve run out of questions, Dustin.” Lucy had her palms flush upon her knees. Tense fingers pressing flesh. Non threatening. In a chair that was pushed opposite everyone.

Reminding her that she was on the other side of the veil.

That they would never fully trust her.

“Can you smell normal things?” Lucas craned and she quirked her lip.

“Yes, almost too well. Everyone has a scent. I break it all apart.”

“Can you catch a scent like a bloodhound?” Mike continued.

“I haven’t really had the chance to test such a thing from great distances. I collect scent and have to get creative, I suppose.” Brown eyes lowered. “You kids have been studying this place, the-”

“Upside Down, we call it. Will, Barbara, they’re all down there.” Mike pointed to a sketch he’d used to explain it. “Can you see into it like El?”

“Well, not exactly...I, I'm honestly not sure what I'm seeing. I think I've been dreaming about it since...” Lucy exhaled, changed her tone. “The gate you’re talking about. I saw a man go in and he didn’t come out.”

"The demogorgon got him." Kids exchanged looks and the adults figured they'd go with it.

"And this gate," Jim recalled as he addressed El with a hard expression, "is it underground near a large water tank?"

"Yes." She kept looking at him and Lucy then away again.

Lucy observed El while they began to debate how to contact Will and Barbara. *Miraculous*, she thought. Eleven and her abilities. How hard she tried to learn about this strange world and push forth to do the right thing. Despite the lab and Brenner. That drive and bravery. That was Terry and it was Mia, too.

The girl wept when the first trial was unsuccessful. Drained from this week that sapped her energy so Mike showed her off to a bathroom.

"Do your batteries drain, too?" Dustin asked when Lucy stood, noticing how all the eyes lifted with her. Wary.

"More than I like to admit." Still woozy from the scrapyard scuffle, Lucy teetered on her feet. Followed the path off when Mike passed. Slipping away into the hall, she found Eleven.

"You're a very brave girl. I hope you understand that." She saw El swerve and jump. "This world, there's a lot of good in it too. I think so. You chose great friends, they'll help you."

"I like them, too."

"Like, what? Your friends?"

"Yes. And the stars." El didn't take her eyes from Lucy but dropped her shoulders in the slightest. Lips quirked.

"They're nice. Sometimes I'd look at them and wonder if Mia caught the same glimpse. I hope so." Lucy came to sit on the edge of the tub. Clearly drained as well. El observed her.

"The world. Outside. Can I grow my hair?" She struggled to find the words. "Is this a place where I can wear what I want?"

"Yes, you can do whatever makes you happy." Lucy beamed and El seemed to enjoy that. "I think it's brave. Trying to be happy..." The young girl felt that resonate for a slow beat. Lucy sighed and went on.

"I understand you're afraid of me. Did Mia... Did she tell you about me?"

"Told me to find you. Zero. Couldn't tell me your real name. Not safe. Only said you looked like her. Black hair. Pretty." El shuffled her feet. "Said you would help me. I didn't know how to look. No picture."

"We're all gonna keep you safe, Elev...El."

"Papa. He'll find us."

"I'll keep you safe." Lucy promised. "Martin will have to go through me first. Okay?"

El gave the smallest nod, stared at her shoes.

"If this is too much, you can stop, too. Brenner didn't teach us limits." A sigh and they locked eyes again. "My abilities didn't develop until I was much older than you, I can't imagine being so young and..."

"Does Papa hurt you?"

"Yes." Lucy swallowed, lip quivering. "Even when he's being kind." El could only nod, barely edging the tension between them. All the questions and answers they held back. Something sparked and El's eyes lingered on the bathtub.

"I can't find them." She realized.

"Will and Barbara? How?"

"The bath." El found some vigor and hurried back to the group with Lucy behind her.

This strange party that had come together, finally ready for the rest

of their answers. So willing to embrace them. The world was opened up now, no going back.

“The bath.” El announced to capture everyone's attention.

“What?” Joyce faced her at the table. Lucy caught Jim's eyes

“I can find them.” She replied, stronger. “In the bath.”

“Isolation tank.” Lucy muttered, side stepping around her. “Sensory deprivation tanks. They put us in them and...it helps clear our minds and we're almost stronger. She's right.”

“And how do we get one of those?” Jim spoke across the way.

“We make one.” Mike shot up from his chair and Dustin got the idea.

“I might know a guy who can help.” The smile was almost infectious.

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“Not safe for us to stay here. School will buy us extra time.” Jonathan led some of them out the door. “They must be looking for you and the girl.”

“Yes.” Lucy peered up at the stars. A chill rose. Why hadn't they come yet? They had to know as the hours passed that the pieces would come together.

Brenner had been so confident Lucy would come into his arms with Eleven. A twisted family.

So very certain, because he knew her well enough. Predicting what she would do was second nature. She learned that much from him.

And then it dawned.

Martin would wait patiently because he still held one important piece over Lucy Garland.

"Mia..." She shuddered as they all piled into the cars. Stopping dead. "You have to go without me." Protests overlapped before Jim came to her.

"Lucy, come on. Get in the car."

"They still have Mia, it's been too quiet. I need to face him." Lucy struggled so Jim latched to her wrist.

"No, we're not doing that."

"I can buy you all more time! If El and I are together, they'll get us both. Martin will make me hurt you. He has my sister. I can't just leave her to him..." Lucy pushed at his arm, dragging toward the Blazer at his beckoning. "It was always going to be like this, Jim."

"No, Lucy, no!" Jim spun to face her, finally bursting with the rage he'd locked down. "I-I can't live with that."

A beat as they stared at each other, the rest of the group stopped around the cars. Not getting between them.

"You have to protect the kids and find the others. I have to save my sister. He's been waiting for me, I know him best so it has to be me against him." Lucy pulled from Jim's grasp. Touched his face. "Go, now. It's gonna be okay."

"You're lying." He pressed his lips and blinked a couple times. "Get in the cars, all of you. We're going." Everyone moved mostly to give them a moment alone.

Jim dropped all pretense. Shuddered against cold wind with his arms falling limp. Trees rustled.

"I can't hear you lie to me anymore, Lucy. I can't." Jim welled as she caressed his face again. Placed her forehead against his before drawing out.

So, she gave him the truth. All heart. Head shaking. Brown eyes narrowed on blue ones.

"I'm in love with you. I have been for a long time, Jim." Lucy felt

every star sparkle brighter. "That was real to me and if I don't earn your trust back. I just want you to know...what we have is real and I wouldn't change one piece of it."

Jim kissed her wrist. Tender and just above the tattoo. Inhaled.

"I love you, too." He felt her thumb smooth one tear aside. "Lucretia."

Lucy thought she could die right there in his arms. Mustered up the courage.

"Now you have to go and save these kids. Protect Eleven and make sure she gets the life she deserves. And I have to save my sister and stop Brenner so they can live in a better world without him. I was always supposed to do that. Contact Will and I'll buy time. He's gonna kill her then the rest of us. If I'm with you, you all die. I'm choosing to believe in fate tonight."

Lucy kissed him. Made it count. Then gave him a shove.

"Go!" She backed up. "I'm going to call them and tell them we're all here. So, leave."

"Lucy... Don't do this. Stay with me." Jim trailed after her inside as Lucy jerked the phone up to dial. He moved like he might wrestle it from her and stopped.

A thousand words hung on little strings from twinkling stars.

And he couldn't reach them. Blue eyes watered and Lucy nodded to affirm her choice.

"Goodbye, Jim." She heard it ring once and couldn't face him.

"Brenner."

"Byers house. They know." Lucy slammed it down and turned to hear cars skidding off. Jim saw her gold shirt shimmer in the distance from the mirror.

Lucy smiled bright. Came to the porch and waited there alone.

Martin's response time amused her.

A fleet of sleek vehicles pulled up. Agents in masks to cover their nose and mouth to protect them from her pheromones. She wasn't on their side anymore either.

Martin grinned behind his when he saw her alone.

"You damn fool." He rasped, gesturing for a guard to snatch Mia Garland from a van. Held her close with a gun.

"Lucy!"

"Mia!" She lurched forward and Martin stepped between them. "Let her go. You have me."

"And you'll what? Feed me more lies. We both know you two will die to protect the girl. It's not worth it, Lucy. You're completely unhinged. You're not mine and you never will be again. I understand the first subject is rarely a success, but you came so close to touching it. Perfection. And now you're just unstable."

"No...Martin, it's you and I." She came to him. Even managed to nestle into his arms all the while he pointed a gun at her jaw. Glittering. "Forever."

"I know what I have to do to make you mine. I've known for a while. You opened my world, Lucy, and I'll never forget that." Brenner stuck his gun away and touched her hair. Let the locks thread his fingers. She whimpered and pressed into him. Saw Mia's eyes over his shoulder. "Tell me you love me."

A beat of wind unfurling.

"Martin, I..." She sniffled. "I'm tired of lesser men telling me how to feel."

And then Lucy drove her knee into Martin Brenner's crotch. Hard.

The shout of pain mingled into the air. Shocked everyone. Mia took the chance to yank her guard's mask aside.

“Lucy, now!” She ducked down and Lucy shoved from Brenner, unable to smack his mask off because he kicked her square in the stomach. Lucy tore up and Mia’s attacker loomed.

Paused with burnt cherry red fury and started shooting into the crowd of agents.

“Get up!” Mia wailed in the chaos. Crawling over dirt. Jerking Lucy to her feet so they could run around the house. Bullets hurtling toward them as the dark woods greeted their feet. “Go! Keep running.” Mia was faster so she pulled her little sister along.

All Lucy could do was look at their hands laced together. Recalled a happier time when they were young teens. Chasing each other around the lawn. Mia was so warm.

“Lucy, hurry!” Mia had laughed all bright back then. They raced home from school in a splatter of rain. Mia’s old saddle shoes were a touch too big on Lucy’s feet at the time. “Keep up with me, I got you!”

A little fall of rain didn’t matter when they were together.

And then Lucy felt the dart hit her square in the spine. It roused a banshee’s cry. Mia yanked her forth and realized it. Plucking it out.

“Hey, you stay with me.”

“Run, you have to keep running.” Lucy pushed at her. “I saved you.”

“No, we’re going. You know I’m not leaving you to them.” Mia shook her sister and saw her flush. “Come on.” They made it over sticks and stones. Heard the suits closing in. “Come on, Lucy! Run, please!” She practically picked Lucy up to help her feet move. Slowed.

“Go, go...”

“I told mom I’d protect you.” Mia fell with Lucy in her arms. Wet dirt matted their knees. “I promised her and I can’t...I can’t break that. I can’t do it, Lucy. I’m s-sorry.”

"I'm too weak..." Lucy dragged herself up. Fell into her sister again. Mia just rocked her. "I'm so sorry, for everything. I was too weak, Mia. I tried."

Mia choked. Held her tight.

"I'm sorry I didn't always answer that phone. Sorry, I let you think I could ever hate you. We knew what we had to do, but...but it..."

Lucy calmed there.

"But, you answered it so many times still. You were still there for me. You're here now."

"He was always going to get us, Lucy, it wasn't you. I never hated you, I didn't." Mia cried, hiding in some thrush between a boulder and a great tree with Lucy pulled close. Chaos in the distance. "You weren't weak. You have so much to offer the world still."

"Just run. Let them take me." Drunken hands came up to push. Mia held her tighter. Saw Lucy's hope dwindled and sealed her own fate to save it.

"He's gonna kill you." Mia cracked. "You know that. If I stay...If I stay, they'll still have something to bargain with. If I stay, you still have a chance to escape. To fight your way out. If I stay, you won't give up. You have to win this."

"No, no. I need you to run." Lucy inhaled Mia's perfume. Her rosy scent. Flowers in bloom. Touch of tropical sweetness. Honeysuckle. Paradise. "No, we did everything right. You have to get away. All those years, and you're so close. It has to be you. You're the strongest, you're the only one with the chance."

"I'm older so I get the first say." Mia tried to smile through her tears, petting Lucy's hair. "You're wrong, Lucy, you fought so hard and you did save me. Just by loving me and being my sister. My baby sister. So, you living beyond this after everything. After all that pain, coming out a whole person...that's how we all win. Me. Mom and dad. All those people in the lab. I did what I could and so many didn't make it. You can live for all of us and even I can't say that. So,

I'm not gonna leave you. I already promised our parents."

"You never break those, Marti."

Mia pressed their foreheads together. Wouldn't leave Lucy because she needed her sister to hold out fighting and that wouldn't happen if she left her alone in the woods.

"I need you to promise me something, too. Okay." Mia had her face. "When the time comes, you let go. Brenner built walls around this chaos and I want you to shatter them and just let go. Lucy. You're the one in power, not him. You hear me? It's okay to let go. You're gonna be fine."

"I...I promise, Mia, I love you..." Lucy hitched to smile. Saw the flicker of flashlights and shouting. Faded into the blackness.

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A harsh slap and a thrill of cold water charged Lucy's world. Still groggy and weak, she moaned.

Acutely aware of a soreness in her wrists. She twisted and heard metal clank. Tried to speak and shifted her tongue into cotton that was stuffed into her mouth. Two slabs of duct tape glued all the sound shut.

"Lucy!" Mia. Calling out. Tugging at her shoulders when they let her go to grovel.

She managed to open her eyes. All the colors danced then took shape.

Home. She was home. What was left of it. Arms spread and handcuffed to either end of the old radiator under the window. Mia crying and clinging against her chest. Furious. Snarling at Brenner seated on the coffee table. Two agents beyond him.

Lucy tried to make sound and Martin stood. Almost happy. Almost in tears. He'd muzzled her at long last.

"My dear sweet, Lucy." He gestured with his gun. "I hope you know

I don't do this out of anger. It's all necessity. The years I had with you, they were everything and I'll never forget them."

"Let her go." Mia was petting Lucy's hair aside. Coaxing her back to the world that needed her most. "I let Eleven out! I did. I let them all out and Lucy had nothing to do with it. I was the one working with Logan. You think you can smash Lucy's hope and I've made sure you can't. She's gonna beat you. For me. For them. For little Jane."

Brenner stilled at her.

"And after all we've done for you. You bloomed with us, Artemisia, don't deny it. Our best nurse."

"*Doctor*. You piece of shit." Mia shielded Lucy. "You won't have either of them. I'll make sure of it. Lucy, I know what you can do, okay? You just let it go-

"Quaint. Dear, we're pressed for time." Brenner snapped his fingers and men began to separate them. Mia kicked and clawed. Drew blood as she was forced to her knees in cuffs and ties.

The absence of Mia woke Lucy up.

She began to struggle until her wrists were raw. Pleading beyond the gag.

"Lucy... Lucy, you listen to me." Mia got sharp with her. Met her eyes and loved her so much. "You're gonna make it out. You have the best parts of our family in one soul and you can carry all of us, it's okay. It's okay."

Lucy tried to say her sister's name. Barely able to breathe right through the ache of their separation. She'd finally gotten her back. She's saved her. She's done it all right.

"It is your story, Lucy, and once you believe that...you'll know it's going to be okay. So, fight, you have to fight. You'll know you're alive and you'll be happy again. I promise you." Tears splattered down hot cheeks and she choked. "I love you so much. I promise you!"

And Mia Garland never did break those.

They taped her mouth, started to drag her off toward the garage and Lucy fought. Martin came to her as she kicked. Adjusted his mask and held her legs down to get close.

“This was a long time coming for you both. I knew the risks and we played our parts. It's cruel. This fate. You fought so hard, both of you. I hope you know that. My Lucy. My Zero. What you gave me will always be unmatched.”

Their eyes locked together. Not faltering. Martin broke some and let a tear fall.

“You just had a bad night. My poor thing. Took just a little too much insulin.” He flashed a needle at her face. “And slipped away silently. These things happen. And when Mia returned home to your broken body...well, she just couldn't handle it. She went just as quiet. Snug in the car full of gas. It was the end I intended for her long ago if you recall, but I granted you both time out of the kindness and affection in my heart. Keeping her was foolish, you both were too willful.”

Lucy heard the car engine already on and cried out. Tried to scream with no avail.

“Your police Chief will mourn you and only remember you for all that betrayal. These people...they'll forget you.” Brenner held her jaw there. “But, I never will. You'll live on at the back of my memories. You'll rest so well.”

He lifted his mask long enough to kiss her head and then her taped lips. Desperately. Crying soft and sweet for her turmoil. Plunged the needle into her stomach and pressed their heads together as Lucy wiggled and moaned. Couldn't push to influence him.

“I've realized that I'm weak for you, Lucy. You alone. And I will never ever let you go and you will never ever truly be mine. Only in death. You gave me the world and I'll always remember that fondly. But, I can't let you distract me from the brighter picture. I can't let you evolve any longer. I hope you enjoy the view from the other side.

I'll bet it smells like sugar plums."

Martin Brenner stood up. Cast one fond look and sighed.

"A damn shame, Lucy. You're the same frail thing who walked into my office. That much is static. This world you're dying for, I'll take great care of it. I love you. Only you."

With that, he left her struggling. Followed his men out the door as she bucked and twisted. Broken glass still all over the floor. Cutting into her legs. Lucy pulled herself all directions.

Almost blacked out again while Mia was in the next room dying. She tried to stand awkwardly and couldn't. Strained and screamed until her vocal cords burst. No sound erupted. She tried to stretch and get the gags off. Fingertips unable to reach her mouth. Wouldn't surprise her if Martin killed or drugged the entire neighborhood to take her down.

Lucy felt something in the back of her mind snap and senses struck like lightning.

Figures bloomed from the bleeding colors. Kristen playing the piano. Gliding over keys. Her parents dancing in the living room. Delicate turns of their feet. Dahlia at the window.

An entire collection of dead butterflies breaking free to flutter all over the room. And Logan. Beaming and stepping toward her until their faces were close.

Help me. She thought. Someone. Anyone.

"You act like you didn't have the weapons with you all along." He chided with his usual brand of sweetness. Smelling of amber and spiced peaches.

I'm not strong enough.

A finger pressed into her heart in response. Beating too fast.

"It's you, Lucy, you're the end. You're the story. It's always been you. Mia and Brenner knew that. Why don't you open your eyes and

see?" He said, whispering now. "See."

One bat and all the colors left her alone. Lucy thought of all those dead. Of Mia who fought for her and for El. *El*. El needed her too. Jim. Joyce. Will. She had to save them. Wanted to show the world who she was after too many years of being something she did not agree to. And if Lucy was to die, she'd go screaming.

She had always hated the ending of Lucretia's story.

Lucy sat up. Tried to say alert before the insulin could take her. Years of breaking down. Mutating. Evolving Manifesting. This is revelation. A chorus of glowing angels suffocating and rotting. Almost beautiful.

That place. The Upside Down. That dead alive city of rot. Breathing with life despite it all and ever growing to touch the world. To learn. To know everything there is to know. To crush the cosmos into smaller fragments until something new is born. To hold the paper to the light and illuminate its writ of secrets.

Maybe it wasn't trying to destroy in truth.

All it wanted was to make something new.

Celestial and terrifying beyond the boundaries of us.

Lucy knew that by heart. The crash of her supernova, it was all rebirth. She was ever-changing too. Remnants of other souls she'd collected. A perfect combined effort that she carried well and she owed it to them all to put up a fucking fight. To scream all the way to the end.

Too much time had already passed.

She pushed herself up some. Looked around. Tried to break her thumb pulling it through the cuffs with no hope in sight. Moaned and dragged harder. Martin left the damn keys on the coffee table. One last gouge at her.

Lungs shuddered and brown eyes lifted to the left side of the radiator where the metal was still broken after all these years. Where

Terry Ives fired that warning shot when she still had her flames. The steel peeled out like a flower with razor sharp petals.

The pulse in her left wrist began to beat hard.

She had everything she needed. Right here in this flesh and marrow.

Even Alice Johnson knew that.

Blood ran slick as oil when it poured fresh.

With no more time to leave ticking, Lucy Garland brought her shaken wrist high toward the sharpest point. Alone and alive. Ready to claw. Ready to scream.

Blood trickled. Slow at first. Dripped hot. Lucy wailed into her gag. Same way Nolan did when he was on her table. She raged and sliced her wrist open. All the way across the skin. Time was flooding and slim now.

She watched the flesh peel back brutally. Had to breathe and then ran the point half way down her palm. Red poured all down her little tattoo.

Rage and heat sweltered. Lucy began to wiggle and pull. The pain of tissue and muscle and nerves stretching to tear shot straight to her heart. Skin started to peel as the bony hand began to squeeze through the cuff with sticky, slick blood drenching the floor. Spurting everywhere. The flesh puckered and pulled almost clean in places. Showing the white bone in back. Bunched up with a sickly squelch.

And then Lucy heard a pop.

The cuff whirled back. She blinked and gasped with sobs. Pushed up and stretched herself as far as she could. One foot hooked around the coffee table's leg and jerked it closer until the keys fell within reach. Skin hung from her bloodied, mutilated hand as Lucy unlocked herself with numb fingers and began to tear at the gag.

One siren's call entered the house the moment she spat cotton out.

Lucy sobbed and heaved against the floor. Half deranged. Clawed through broken glass and used furniture to stand. Bloodied the piano and hit echoing keys to underscore her triumph as she went. Into the kitchen area where she laid in the fridge to drink some orange juice down before hypoglycemia could take her. Lucy choked and spilled it aside. The oncoming seizure subsided.

Mia. Mia needs her strong. Lucy wrapped a cloth around her wrist and stole the duct tape to secure it. Tore the strip with her teeth. Shaken and crying so hard. Covered in blood and sweat. She bound her hand back together.

This didn't feel real. Felt like she was still struggling there. Lucy came around the island and her brain snapped apart again. With her blood dripping all over the living room. Enticing a monster beyond the veil. Lights flickered.

The figure that greeted her stretched out from the floor. Rose to tower. Unfurled its face to display those razor rose petal teeth. Lucy staggered forward with her hands out.

"You're smaller th-than I remember," she sputtered and trembled with huge eyes, "and you're not real. You're only made of moonlight."

The demogorgon roared in her face. Air rushed out into black locks. Steam upon flushed cheeks.

Lucy came to it. All lavender. Stood taller without fear. Did not bow. Pulled off her earrings. Expensive pair that Brenner gave her years ago. Gold glinted against ruby red blood.

She dropped the jewelry into the monster's claws. Paid a toll of sorts and went forth around it.

"Not real... Not real." Her back turned and the monster lowered to all fours.

Didn't pursue her.

"Mia! I'm c-coming." Lucy fell into the garage. Kicked a tube free of the exhaust pipe and coughed harshly getting into the car. "Mia!

Come on!” Pale and motionless, Mia had the other end taped over her nose before it was jerked aside. How long had Lucy fought for? She wailed and screeched, unable to lift her sister out.

So, she got into the driver’s seat and crashed the car through the garage door. Skidded out onto the street and almost hit a stop sign at the end.

“Mia!” Lucy got the windows down and shook her sister about. “Mia! Wake up! I need you so wake up! Promise me!”

A cough and Mia’s glassy eyes opened. Lucy tore some duct tape from her and managed to unlock the cuffs. Held her body close hoping to warm it up because she was cold. Mia was so cold now.

“Lucy...” She croaked. “Lucy?”

“Hold still, they’re at the school. I’m g-going to save them.” Lucy smiled with delirious glee on the brink of total insanity. “I saved you. I saved you. So, I can save them, too.” Hands belted Mia into the seat before the gas was struck hard. Tires screeching toward Hawkins Middle School. Lucy swerved around empty vans. Couldn’t find Jim’s car.

What had she missed? Brenner found them regardless.

And Lucy found someone, too. A flash of blonde hair. Connie with a gun, guarding the doors.

Headlights flashed brighter and Lucy charged. Teeth bared. Saw the woman try to evade and smashed into her head on. Metal crunched and Connie’s face broke through the windshield as she was pinned between the bumper and brick wall. Blood exploded down Lucy’s front.

Lucy searched Mia over and got out on weak ankles. Aware that she was still bleeding. Getting colder herself. Lungs quaked when she rasped.

“Bitch... That was for Benny.” Lucy leaned over and saw Connie wheeze at her, spitting out teeth. Nose flat. Broken. Face busted. The light left her eyes so Lucy leaned in closer for a good look. Stole her

gun and got in to press it into Mia's freezing fingers. Weakly, she tried to breathe and pull at her sister. Fading in and out.

"Lucy, you're hurt. I—"

"Stay right here. Where it's s-safe. You take this and shoot anyone who isn't me...got it?" Lucy spied Logan again. Seated in back looking too solemn. She cracked again with tears. Smiled and pet Mia's hair. "Logan will watch over you, right?"

"I'll take good care of her, sweetheart."

"Lucy..." Mia tried, marble fingers grazed a wet cheek. "Lucy, look at me."

Mia searched her eyes, lulling. Appeared as if she wanted to say more. But, her sister was fighting too hard. She wouldn't still that.

"Stay here, Mia...gonna save them. All those babies...like I saved you. It's gonna be okay." Lucy kept muttering to herself. Wounded hand pulled close to her heart. Half dead. Stumbling along to go inside and follow the smell.

The children were here, she felt it. What the fuck happened? No Joyce or Jim. No Nancy or Jonathan. The young kids roamed and Brenner had found them.

What Lucy didn't know yet is that as her game ended with Hawkins Lab, Jim's began.

She could hear the children shouting. The sounds of heavy boots and soldiers with their weapons ready. Carnage. Lucy pushed off walls to go on. Not able to stop herself at that point and she dared death to try taking her now.

"Let her go, you bastard!" Mike's cry got Lucy charging a little faster. And she found them surrounded by agents. Eleven on the floor with Martin holding her close. Whispering.

"*Martin!*" Lucy's siren wail echoed. Lasers all pointed to her and Brenner propped Eleven up to stand. Pride filled the air. He opened his arms for her. All too happy. Unafraid.

“Stand down! No...my sweet Lucy. You found your way back to me. You fought to me alone. I hoped you would. I dreamed it.” That cool collection he was known for fractured in lieu of laughter. Bold and bright. “You understand now, don’t you? You’re mine. You came to me.”

“You won’t have me again. You won’t have her either.” Sweaty and flushed, she managed a step.

“You have nothing, Lucy. No one. Only me. Will all this bloodshed bring your loved ones back?” Brenner stepped toward her at the end.

Nothing but her shadow. Framed by the roaring tiger’s mural. Lucy breathed heavily. Feet planted. Dangerous.

“I gave you everything and all I asked for was *you*.” Martin continued. “All of you in return. An equal exchange. I never wanted this end for you, it was supposed to be us against them. You crushing our enemies. But, these people will remember your weakness. Your rot. I am all your memory has to save your soul. Tell me what you want most.”

“Can you bring Jim's heart back to me?” She tore out. Crushed. “Can you give Mia back her life? What about Logan? Terry? My parents? Did you even know their names? Did you learn the names of anyone you destroyed? Can you spin air into gold? No...because you’re pathetic and you’re just one man... One man who destroyed everything and all I did was let you... You just take hope away, Martin, and you have nothing left to give me. Nothing left to take. My body, you had it. But, you will never have my mind. Not again. I’m free. You’ll never be rid of me though, but I’m free of you.”

Another step.

“Don’t be so sure.” He’d hissed. Behind him, El was sagged into the wall with her friends struggling hard to get to her. “You’re nothing without me and you know that. Will anything ever be enough for you, my dear? You’re starved. All that sacrifice. Every price you paid. For nothing. Sweet Lucy. Mine, all mine.”

“Enough? Maybe not.” Lucy decided, left with nothing. “But, your

pain will suffice.”

There was a gust of wind. Lights shattering. Lucy’s siren call.

And then she let chaos rain.

Growled low and unleashed everything she had left. Back arching to bask in it. Martin’s knees hit the floor when he smelt lavender. And he was forced to watch it.

His budding horror bloom. Agents began to scream in tune. Began to kill themselves and each other. Began to tear each other apart all over the school. Lucy gushed blood and stayed tall to watch it. To hear it. More blood rained and she thought to dance in it. Laugh like a little girl again.

“Enough!” Martin hissed and Lucy stepped toward him. Lights flickered all over. Those who were left began to reel back. Red painted the walls in rose and velour.

“Blood!” Mike gasped out as the tiger mural started to bend and break. Lucy turned to see it unfurl. The monster clawed.

“Lucy, get away from it!” The boys all started to shout. “Run!”

She didn’t move. Just waited peacefully. Spidery limbs stretched out and two gold earrings dropped at her feet. That revelation was too stark to ignore. *Real*. It grew out before her and Martin actually jerked her back away. Shielded her from bigger monsters.

“It wants to know me...” She cast him aside and came forth. Colorless. It seemed to notice her and sniff the air. More blood dripped from her nose. Sweet lavender unfurled.

Slow and steady, the monster closed its clawed fists. Spread those elongated arms to mirror the exact position Lucy was in while she was bound.

“Am I alive?” She asked of it. “Are you dead?” No pretense. No fear. Nothingness. Lucy turned her back to it. Faced the group. Breath cast into her hair as it lingered closer. “I understand now, Martin, why I’m still alive and everyone else is dead. I’m the same as them in a way.

The rot, it came from me. Didn't it? It had to go somewhere and it changed the world. It's why I see them all still. I just hadn't noticed it before. I'm tethered to it."

Longer fingers curled over her shoulders. Head framed by the mighty unfurling of the monster's face.

"You're a god." Brenner marveled. Jaw open. Like he might be looking into the sun itself hoping to have his eyes burned out. And it would be worth it for Lucy Garland. For she was the center of his world.

"I am only Lucretia. And that was enough." She breathed. Defied death and life together. "Some want to run from this magnificent and monstrous power. Some chase it to madness. Me? I never cared for either option. I just...am. It's why I was the first one. Why that place manifested sick with bile, it had no choice."

Lucy submitted. Embraced every sensation. Felt four claws tear over her shoulder. Something to remember in the long haul. This part of herself that was fantastic and terrifying.

"Kill." She spread her arms at the same time the monster lunged around her. Left her alone to tear the rest of them apart. Brenner was tossed to the floor, crawling over bodies as Lucy skidded to help the boys pulling Eleven up.

"Take her and go. Now! Go!" Lucy felt all her strength weaning. "I can only hold it for so long." More blood poured with the shredding of flesh. The inhuman clicking of the monster and her will driving it home. Lucy looked vast into space and saw red through its eyes, one moment of connection. Like they were one with each other.

El's little hand curled into Lucy's blouse.

"You're gonna be okay, El. Go..."

The boys hesitated and carried Eleven off before the monster reached them. Lucy curled up as it jumped around her. Hands spread and it stopped at her beckoning, instead went for the next round of agents and soldiers unleashing bullets.

Martin called out for Eleven and tore Lucy down to the floor. Furious. He began to race after them, limping. Heels skidded and Lucy used what little fight she had left to tackle him down. Knees pressed into his chest as he fought and smacked at her.

“You won’t touch her again! Never again!” Lucy held him in a pool of syrupy blood. They rolled around and she got atop him once more. Struggling to breathe as he pushed up against her. She tried to hang on. Tried to keep going. To fill him with poison and none came.

A pair of paled hands reached in next to her. Before Brenner could shove her off.

“You got him, Lucy.” Mia sounded deathly calm as she came down to help hold Brenner in place so Lucy could focus. “Keep fighting, it’s almost over. You’re nearly there. It’s going to be okay. I’m here.”

“I can’t...”

“Oh, Lucy,” Martin spat against them, “are you going to fulfill your wish to kill me at long last?”

The demogorgon blasted over the last few soldiers and followed the path further away. Growls clicked and echoed the hallways. Soaked Lucy in blood and guts.

She bared her teeth and realized it all at once.

“I don’t want to kill you, Martin.” She eased. Blinking. “I want you to live.”

“Because you need me.”

“You need me. I showed you love. I know what it smells like now. I’m supposed to give you what you lack.”

Lucy had the scruff of his collar bunched up in her good hand.

“I want you to love too. Hard and long and vast. I want you to feel it so profoundly. And I want it to *ache*.”

She leaned over as if she might kiss him. Filled him with the burn

of cinnamon. Other emotions overlapped. Pumped into him until his pupils blew. Until he laughed. Until he cried. Until he seized with a pain in his chest. Until he was completely unmade. Psyche fracturing under the weight of her spell.

Brenner looked into her eyes and only saw two echoing lights. A shining.

“I want you to feel exactly as I do. That’s what you want? The sensations of a god in your veins. Nowhere to hide. So, love me...”

Lucy smiled at him. Gasping for some air. Sickly sweet. Ready to breathe light and smoke.

“Love me.” She urged with Mia static next to her. Ghosts pooled to crane over their shoulders and observe. “Love me.”

Martin looked wild at her. Kept laughing until he could scarcely breathe. Until he was sobbing in a mania.

“I want you to love so hard, it hurts. I want you to ache and to live just like that. Just like that...” Lucy sagged a little. Felt her veins crawl to pieces. Blackened as her ears and nose bled. “I want you to love so hard, you just don’t know what to do with it all.”

And he could torment himself as she had for too many years.

Something snapped in Martin’s soul. At long last. Gave rise to insanity until he was laughing even louder. Obscene. Tears left his eyes. Lucy collapsed next to Brenner and Mia crawled over her.

“Lucy, stay here with me.” She urged.

Martin turned over, still in total mania. Stood up and spread his arms, cackling. The monster perked and came back down the hallway. Dragged Brenner up higher. Claws tore and something wet Lucy’s face before her eyes rolled back too as he was dragged off. Thrown toward the opening.

Laughter cut.

Mia covered her sister in the chaos. Tried to pull her off in flickers.

Lucy felt a burn in her chest. Drew back to curve as glass shattered all over.

Elsewhere, the monster arched to roar at the same time Eleven lifted her hand to it distantly. Lucy saw through the red again. El standing to fight back.

“El, let go.” She’s whispered through the eyes of the beast. Remembered what Mia said. “That chaos. It’s alright to let go.”

They screamed in tune. Another bond shattered for a new one to strike. Lucy went into black again.

It was all distant flashes. Underscored by *Ave Maria* playing like a lullaby in her head.

Mia’s voice. Crystal clear. Begging her to stay.

Little hands pulling at her arms. Helping heave her through the slick hallways. Smoke. Sirens. Wet pavement.

Lucy groaned. Choked on some air and turned over.

“Hey, hey! Guys, she’s back!” Lucas shook her around and Dustin helped to prop her up. Mike too. All of them crying.

“El?” She asked. The grave expressions tore her to pieces. Mike shook his head.

“She saved us.” Was all he got out. Lucy squeezed her eyes shut and tried to stand. Fell into her totaled car.

“Mia!” She beckoned, opening the door further to support her body. A blurry figure in the distance caught her eyes. Waving the ambulances over. “Mia!”

“Oh, my god...guys...” Dustin’s horrified tone caught sight of something behind her. Lucy didn’t dare turn to see what it was as Mia paced toward her. Battered. Relieved somehow.

“Mia, I s-saved...” Lucy tried to hold herself up on the trunk. Head lulling. Sickly and trembling. Mia cupped her face and kissed her

cheek. "You're so cold. I...I saved..."

"I know." Mia held her there. "Just remember, Lucy, you living free. It's how we all win. You're the beginning and the end. You're going to be okay now. You did it."

"It's my story." Lucy smelt her sister again. Inhaled it all. Sighed into it. Content. Alive.

"Who's she talking to?" Lucas had uttered.

"My story..." Lucy crumbled back into the car as Mia ran to get them help. Waved the ambulance over.

"My little sister, she needs help," Mia called out so they passed her with shouts too, "save my baby sister."

Too many hands were prodding. Shifting Lucy onto a gurney as she tried to stay awake. Straps and needles. Kinder voices that lulled her away.

"She's a diabetic. Be careful with her." Dustin was chattering to help the EMTs.

"We got her, kid. It's okay now."

"Mia! Mia, stay with me!" Lucy's garbled voice was muffled under a plastic mask. They loaded her into the ambulance so more EMTs went to help the boys. Doors slammed.

"I'm here. I'm still here with you. It's you and me, we're together." Mia eased from a little seat in the corner. "Let them work on you now. It's all okay, you can rest now." That got Lucy welling. Something as simple as granted rest. "We're here, we're always going to be together. Dream yourself into a beautiful dream. We're both okay. You fought so hard. Dream."

"Only if you're here with me..." Lucy closed her eyes. Still beaming. Dreamed.

As the ambulance blared in the distance, Dustin wiped his eyes on a blanket that was offered and came to huddle with his friends. Mourn

Eleven. A beat.

“Do you boys know what happened here?” One man was pushing into Lucy’s vehicle.

“No,” Mike sniffled, “we don’t know what happened.”

There was a creak under the sirens.

A pile of black hair spilled out of the side door with a colorless hand following. Cold.

“I’m so sorry, she’s gone.” Two men helped lay a body on the concrete. “Do you know this woman?”

“She...” Dustin sniffled and tried to speak. “I think she’s her sister.”

They all looked on to the grey body of Doctor Mia Garland. Eyes closed because she was dreaming. Peaceful and accepting. Knowing that her sister was alive somewhere because Lucy was a fighter, too. Maybe that was a sibling thing. Just knowing. Purple around her mouth because she breathed too much of that gas in and never had a chance even as Lucy fought to save her.

She’d been gone before Lucy tore herself asunder.

Another stunning butterfly to be pinned under glass and admired.

Lucy was rocked to sleep upon the gurney. Free in her way. Now the carrier of all those she loved with Mia's added strength.

Sometimes, you had to wipe terrible things from your mind to survive. Even if it never really goes away. Just waits for a better day to bloom if such a thing exists.

If you’re ever really ready.

And all it can do is follow you around like a ghost until that time strikes.

It wasn't that hour for Lucy. So she dreamed of cotton candy and Ferris Wheels. Of Mia in her pretty dress and cinnamon hand lotion.

Of climbing trees. Of the harrowing keys and overlapping tones that vibrated her heart. *Ave Maria*.

An endless symphony that was utterly warm. Like forgiveness and like hope and like love. Things that were still always free. Fragments that tangled her soul from those lost and found. Things that made her fight.

Things that would still scatter over Lucy's heart long after this.

Notes for the Chapter:

I cried pretty hard after I wrote this one, but I'd love to talk about it. I hope it's understood why this route was the chosen course. Heroes fight and sometimes they lose. The next chapter is also a hard one for Lucy and graphic. I hope you guys trust me to handle the rest of Lucy's story and don't give up hope here, there is a lot to come!! Promise!

Please if you're there, chat with me below if you have time! Thank you all so much again and there is more storm to come with hope and healing down the line. xoxo, I'd love to hear from readers ty! My tumblr is Alias-B

23. Transverberation

Notes for the Chapter:

Transition aftermath of the S1 ending. Lucy struggles to cope with her losses when more pile on. Jim's new role weighs on him. Just going to jump into the major triggers for this chp, it's one more dark one before things improve coming up. TW: Self-mutilation, hospitals, mental break. Mentions of death/s*icide. Tread carefully and thank you all for reading.

The steady beeping seemed to last for hours. Hours and hours. Voices closed in. Kept telling her to just dream until the worst was over. If it ever would be.

Lucy's fingers shifted. Padded over thin cotton. Eyelids twitched and tried to work themselves open. Light burned in a flood. Pure white. Harsh and unforgiving. People too often said Hell was full of fire and volcanic rock.

If Lucy were to picture a Hell, it was all white, artificial light. Endless and horrible with no place to hide.

Her chest shuddered. Drowsy and drugged to hell. Three IVs and wires all over. The beating sped. Brown eyes blurring as if someone pulled a gossamer shroud over her face.

White curtains all around her gave the room a dreamy glow. She opened her mouth to speak through a mask and managed an ugly, rasping groan. Her left hand was wrapped tight in a thick mitten of bandages. One curtain shifted.

"Hello there."

A figure blurred together when her eyesight returned so he went on.

"Why your mother couldn't just name you, Lucille, I'll never

understand.” The bright cheeriness was not expected. Made her almost believe the worst was over. Lucy, still not all there, appeared dazed. Just blinking at this man she’d never seen. Sixties. Little portly. Grey hair and light demeanor. Too light.

“Lucy Garland. Try not to move, you have a lot of healing ahead and it’s never fast for diabetics. Considering your old doctors were trying to kill you with that dose, I think you’ll feel better after we adjust it for real.” He continued. “I read your file. Size of a dictionary, but I had a week to do it.”

He went to a phone and dialed.

“It’s me... Yeah, she’s awake. I’d hurry over here, Pop.” The receiver clicked.

A whole week? Lucy opened her mouth and closed it. Groaned again.

The doctor moved around for a couple of minutes. Mulled over charts to make notes from her vitals.

“Remarkable subject. The only files I was able to recover. They tried to torch them before we swept in to take over. To get this contained. It appears Dr. Brenner had been telling stories outside of class.” He came to the bed and set his clipboard aside. “My name’s Dr. Owens. Sam, I prefer to close friends and pretty ladies.” His joke roused a couple more blinks.

He was strange, Lucy decided.

“How about you nod for me, Lucy?” Sam touched her right wrist and looked at his watch. “You remember what happened?”

A nod.

“You remember your name and address?”

Another nod.

“You remember you take two insulin shots a day? Your favorite book? The last time you-”

“Mm...” She swallowed dry and he got her some water. Brought the straw up so Lucy could drink.

"Just take it easy."

“M-Mia. Mia?” Lucy insisted.

His hand lowered. That bright expression dropped while he met her eyes again. It ached that her sister wasn't here at her bedside waiting. Rushing to hold her so close so that Lucy would really know in her heart that the worst was over.

“W-Where...is she? My sister” Lucy's head shook. “Saved her. I saved her. She's a doctor too, with black hair like mine and...and-”

“Lucy, there isn't an easy way to tell you this. The pain and stress has you confused, you almost died. You stopped breathing on our table twice. Quite the fighter.” He met her eyes. “Doctor Mia Garland...your sister, she didn't make it.”

That disgusting white light torched her insides.

“Ngh-No. We got to the school. She helped me. She was right there.”

“Lucy. You were bleeding out. Delirious. I'm sorry. I am. Your sister had been dead in that car for at least an hour, dear. I'm so sorry. It wasn't your fault-”

“No!” Lucy blazed that time, pushing up so he hit a button. One drunken hand tore her mask off. “She was alive! I felt her! She talked to me. She...She...”

Lucy winced and tried to breathe through the hole that had been punched directly through her heart.

Nurses burst in. Held her when she began to scream and squirm. Another body shoved into the room. Khaki uniform. Jim.

“Lucy, stay down, you're not well.” His hands lifted and he sounded out of breath.

"Where's Mia!" Lucy shoved up again. Jim got between the nurses and her bed. Pushed her down.

"Lucy," he trembled and sighed out at the feel of her alive in his grasp, "Lucy, you gotta lie down and listen."

"Mia!" Lucy called out. Aimless. "Mia, tell them!" A figure shifted behind the curtain and Lucy felt her heart lift. But, they moved it aside and... Not Mia. Another nameless face with a happy needle.

"She didn't make it, sweetheart, I saw her. I confirmed it." Jim's eyes were watery too.

He remembered his schoolboy crush on Mia Garland and the blush her smile once brought him. Lucy wailed there. Face crumbling into his chest. These horrid, unearthly screams.

A vase of roses shriveled and died with her. Every plant in the room browned. Drooped.

Sam Owens noted it too.

"Hey, hey, I got you, just breathe." Jim coaxed the wailing to sputtering cries. Realized she was talking. Trying to.

"I'm not in the hospital. I'm in the lab, get me out of here! Mia!" Lucy was struggling so hard until a needle pricked as Jim held her down.

"It'll calm her some, she's not ready for this, Pop." Owens gripped her arm to inject. Thumb rubbing some gauze into the area. "There you go, dear. Give it a moment."

"Mia...Mia..." Lucy puffed. Disoriented. Numb. She smelt Mia. She felt her. And the worst was far from over. Mia's ghost hung upon her back. A might weight she could barely carry.

The same way she felt the other dead souls roaming. Just perfume bottles she'd collected for comfort.

"You have to let us explain." Jim felt her wean and smoothed black hair aside. Fingers trailed over a new addition to her look. Some side

effects to what happened. This stark, too thin stripe of silver-white locks that elegantly framed her right side. Just in the hairline above her left brow

"Will?" Her skull lulled back. "Will?"

"We saved Will and you helped us. He's okay. He's home now." Jim brushed her tears away. "You gotta rest and let us explain things. Everything's changed."

Of course, Lucy thought.

She woke up without a sister.

The drugs pulled her back under and frankly, she didn't want to be anywhere else.

"She's got nothing to do with this..." Jim's voice had her coming back an hour or so later.

"She has to meet us halfway. I burned her file, but she touched that place. There are people alive who know what she can do. I can't silence them all." Owens exhaled.

"Believe it now?"

"I've seen my share, Chief." Owens regarded him, finished a mug of hot coffee that tasted old. "There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

"And that...gate?"

"We'll contain it." He gestured to Jim's badge. "Same way you'll contain this." Owens rubbed his head and peered at Lucy trying to rouse. "Miss Garland has a life outside this place. An identity. That makes her lucky."

"How's that?"

"Those who didn't will be hunted. Officially they don't exist. Hard to work with that."

Jim thought of Eleven. That little lost girl beyond a veil.

Lucy felt around. Gaspd this time and shot up. Coffee slipped from Jim's cup as he came to her, setting it aside.

"Hey, hey. Easy." He pressed her into pillows.

"Get me out of here..."

"These people, they're different. They're here to help. I made a deal with them, Lucy." Jim shook his head and Owens crossed. Looking a little heavier.

"It's all the same." Lucy welled and lifted a hand to her lips. "Did they bury her? Mia."

"They're waiting for you." Fingers tucked black hair. Lucy crushed in on herself.

Mia was dead. She couldn't save her. Her sister was gone. Forever. The words might have tasted funny. When people asked if she had a sibling, what could she tell them?

"Can I go home?"

"Lucy, it's complicated. You need time to heal first before you're ready for this. We recommend you stay with someone not involved. The Crawfords said they'd take you in for a few days until we can give you the answers."

"Aren't I already in my prison? The drapes don't mask the smell. I know this is Hawkins Lab. Martin hiding around a corner?" She hissed, pushing up again.

"That thing got him. His blood was all over that hallway." Jim blinked. "You're not well. I'll tell you everything, but I can't yet. We're still working out the details..."

Lucy lifted her left hand to see it.

"It's still attached. Your hand. No broken bones, but the mobility will be limited until we get you healed up. Physical therapy, too."

Owens crossed. "Jim mentioned you play the piano. We'll get you there again."

"Stop acting like we're on the same side." Lucy jerked from Sam as he reached out.

"Miss Garland. Everything is about to change and we have to be on the same side out of sheer necessity." Came the reasoning. "I know what this place did to you."

"You don't know shit." Lucy lunged up and tried to claw for him. Jim grabbed her arms as Sam jerked back. Genuine fear flashed. Jim didn't fully trust the guy, but he was upholding the deal. "This place stole children. Ruined families. This place tore my life and body apart. Broke my bones! Killed my sister! Men put their hands under my gown! Men tortured us. This place rots! And I'd die to see it burn! You hear me, you son of a bitch?"

"Lucy!" Jim was hugging her close as she kicked and bucked.

"Mia's dead! She's dead!" Lucy howled into his shirt. Sounds he'd never wipe from his brain. Screaming cries that echoed. "My s-sister."

It was returning. Lucy pulling the tube and tape away from Mia's lifeless mouth. Those glassy eyes staring at nothing because she choked and suffocated all alone. Lucy smiling and buckling her limp body in. Feral with hope. No one saw Mia. Not Martin or the kids or the monster. Only Lucy.

A flash of Mia's smile scorched her brain. This washed-out polaroid that just wouldn't burn.

And Lucy just gave in to the numbness. Stopped crying and fractured out. Let them sedate her again. She decided not to say anything else. Not like they'd tell her shit. But, she refused them her mind and answers in return.

Owens worked tirelessly to get her walking the next day and she wandered like a ghost. Thin cotton clinging to bones and overlapping wires. Lucy ate the food they put in front of her and even took her shots. No words, no nothing. Even during the visit from Joyce and

Jim.

Will Byers brought her a card the day after. Skinny and pale, but healing better than she was.

“It’s you as a witch and the flowers you were growing in your yard. I didn’t know your hair changed. You look like Rogue. She’s an X-Men and really cool.” He explained, holding it straight out. Lucy’s eyes drew from his to the picture. Warmed.

Joyce and Jim were seated in chairs behind him. Will came to sit on the bed without fear.

“I saw you in there,” he said, “telling me to run. You talked to me a lot. Like a dream, but... You’re magic, aren’t you? ...Like...like the girl. Mike’s friend.”

Lucy blinked at him which was answer enough so he went on.

“That place, it...does something to us. Makes us see things and we’re connected. I had this other dream about you and woke up thinking it smelled like car exhaust... I’m sorry. If you need to run away into my dreams, it’s okay. They’re not bad. Not always.”

Lucy lifted her eyes and touched Will’s face. Granted a kiss upon his head. There was something slightly acidic in his scent that wasn’t there before.

He’d been digested like her.

“Thank you, Will.” She offered softly. First time speaking in hours. Jim and Joyce exchanged looks. Sun rays streamed in to paint the survivors there. Lucy shifted to let the glimmer touch her face. Illuminate her sparkly, brown eyes. Haunted. Will Byers was a great listener though and he wasn’t afraid of her like so many others. “I wouldn’t call it magic. It’s like this light behind your eyes. It’s just...a shining.”

He seemed to understand that.

“That place,” she whispered, “the Upside Down. It’s just a somber, hungry place and it feeds on what shines brightest.” She admired the

card and set it aside. Rose to look beyond Will. “Did they let Joyce and Will in because they’re part of the deal?”

“Lucy, things are-”

“Different now, you keep saying that. I guess it feels all the same to me.” She dropped her shoulders. No Mia. No freedom. Eyes all over her body. Admiring her because she was the prettiest doll behind glass.

Lucy was growing tired of being beautiful. Irrevocably.

These people who coveted her still stepped aside as blood pooled and they fucking stared because they wanted her. Knowledge of her. They wanted to open up her chest and peek aside with no blame. Bite the juicy heart and feed to fuel themselves.

They wanted sweet and ill Lucy to stroke their egos until they were coming harder than anyone else will ever make them. They wanted to use her blood as fingerprint for their mighty works and scream when she was bone dry.

For a moment, Lucy wished the Upside Down just rotted everything. She forgot little wonders and wanted nothingness because her hope died with Mia.

But, she said nothing.

Just thanked Will Byers for his bright eyes despite all he went through. Jim showed them out and promised to return. Owens would be up soon to oversee her.

He’d taken on her file personally and only let in others that were trusted. They didn’t know the whole truth of her, there was almost comfort in that. But, how Dr. Owens pried her for answers. About the things she did. Why the flowers became rot.

What inside Lucy made a contained man like Martin Brenner covet to obsession?

Lucy was increasing.

Transverberation.

Pierced to the core with such utter heavenly ecstasy that simple things like pain and pleasure blur. You manifest with an extraordinary affair of euphoria. A growing spiritual awareness that puts all bodily matter to shame. Nothing you feel after ever measures up and that was almost too gutting to stomach.

It felt like she died. Like she'd already experienced everything there was to feel and nothing else could compare. That was always a fear with living. She'd be a haunting legend to be told for eons to come. A cautionary tale.

The Demogorgon branded her an equal in death. Lucy had dreamed of riding a white horse the night before. Muscles bulging, it delivered her to a starlit pond covered in fireflies and pale, silk lilies. Brenner taking her hand for a last dance. Him grinning deathly wide until his face cracked apart to show those razor petals and Lucy's too caught to scream.

"Be my victim," he growled, the swelter of hot breath on her face, "be eternal. They'll tell our stories, Lucy. Our names will be written on a thousand walls."

A spear of fire pierced her heart.

Consumed in her daydreams, Lucy shuddered. Jim came to the bed. Tried to touch her arm but she jerked away.

"Do you think it really sounds better when you lie to me, Jim?" She craned her head. Snapped out of it. He didn't have a good answer so nothing came out to appease her. Only his practiced lines.

"Just give it a few more days, Luce, I'll tell you everything. The deal. You gotta work with these people until then."

"I worked with these people a lot longer than you did. I stood to Brenner's right and murdered in his name. What I let him put inside me is of little consequence. So, don't fucking tell me how to be with them. It's fucking patronizing." She reclined. Hated his pity. Hopper nodded at that. Jaw tense. Understood. "How did they find the

children? Tell me that, please.”

Jim searched her. Really searched long and vast. The truth would ruin her.

“I wish I knew. We made the deal to go in and they...they could have felt the change. Tapped into something. Followed it to the kids.” He rubbed his eyes. Hated himself for the look she gave him.

Jim got serious.

“Work with them now. It’s the only way. I’m gonna help you.”

Lucy really examined him in turn.

“You can’t, Jim.”

“And you can’t stop me from trying.” He kissed her temple that time. Lingered and Lucy willed herself to not fall into his arms.

Every nerve pulled and ached as the drugs flowed in and out of her body. They cleaned her hand that night and she glimpsed the disgusting, jagged stitches that would scar. Upside down cross like a demonic omen. Puffy and pink. Stiff fingers curled in. Twitching ever so often. Three surgeries to get it back to something next to normal apparently. Owens glimpsed the tattoo just an inch shy of the wound.

“Am I gonna lose my hand?” She spoke.

“No. Some of the damage will stick for a long time. You’re at risk for infection, of course. As long as you follow the routine set out for your health, you should be fine.” He quirked his lips up at her face. Lucy stared. Grey and dead.

Owens smelled like amber. And peaches. And she couldn't even try to resent it.

“That much I can do.”

Lucy was drugged to hell when they let her leave for the Crawfords with some begging. Jim brought her to their cozy home. Tasteful and minimalist. Decorated in history and macabre artifacts. Lucy had a

million questions and no will to ask. About Mia who was lost to smoke. About Brenner who was dead on the record with no confirmed body. About Eleven who never came home. About what was left of her life.

All she did was cry and lie in bed. Refuse visitors, but not food even if she ate very little. The first two days, she couldn't let anyone touch her. She hissed acid at Jim when he tried. Sent him away.

Mia's funeral was a breaking point. Lucy wanted it now. Just needed to see Mia all pretty and bury her sister with their parents. It was hard to glimpse Mia in that box after she'd spent so much of her life in one. But, she'd want to be with mom and dad.

Lucy didn't speak. Just stared. Collapsed outside in Beverly's arms and had to be taken home early. She clung to Bev until the older woman got her undressed to wash and eat.

It was strange. Being a daughter again. For the first time, Lucy let herself relish it. Let herself be babied. Beverly spoke in gentle tones and brushed her hair after a bath of warm bubbles. Sang her to sleep. Affection she so missed poured out as she wandered their house like a ghost. One of them always stayed home to be with her that week.

She still didn't speak much. They gave her forehead kisses goodnight and woke her with warm meals. Routines. Lucy got lost in this one for a couple of days. Watched games shows and cartoons. Only read sappy, sickly sweet romance novels because it was all she could stomach. Happy endings. Took all her meds. Let Frank clean her hand every night.

The official story was a car accident. Another terrible string of luck in Lucy's life. Lost her parents and sister now to the same crunch of glass and metal. Lucy wouldn't let them utter the word suicide in her sister's direction.

The town witch and her series of unfortunate events.

Jim came as promised one night after dinner. Lucy just took her bath and changed into a baby blue nightie. Freshly laundered cotton that smelled of spring and lavender. He found her in the basement

where she'd been living for the week with a romance novel in hand.

"Lucy..." He watched her stand. Wounded hand curled into her ribs out of habit now when it wasn't in a sling. She looked too skinny. Almost colorless. Darting eyes. Fidgeting and no longer the still starlet he recalled from summer. Jim came when she nodded and removed his hat. "Hey."

"Hi." She didn't really say the word. Only mouthed it.

"They told me you were healing well."

A shrug.

"You promised." She reluctantly looked up at his eyes. "I want to see my home."

"I think you should sit down." He stepped toward her and she about lurched back from him. Dropped her book aside and came to sit at a little table so Jim joined her. A puzzle of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* was half-finished upon it.

"I'm not going home ever again, am I?" Lucy blankly plucked up a puzzle piece and settled it in its uniform place. Not even looking at Jim. "I know it's all gone. I've been in this business for a long time, Jim. Tell me. From the start."

"That night, Joyce and I were caught trying to break into the lab. Will was in that place so we made a deal for him. Officially, Hawkins Lab had nothing to do with it. They let us go in and it was chaos when we got out. What happened at the school... Dr. Owens arrived and we made the same deal. He's running things and he's going to help keep this contained. I have to play my part on the outside. We don't know what happened to Will down there."

"You offered him to that lab, you damn fool." Lucy crushed her teeth. "And me?"

"Owen's managed to keep you out of it. Off the record. He knows what happened to you. They want to monitor your health. That's all. He even agreed to do it at a real hospital. They don't know everything about you, Lucy, but this is still too dangerous. Only

Owens is aware now. I don't think he knows it all either. I don't trust him, but I have to enough for this. You're going to heal and lay low. There are people out there who could come after you if they knew. El most of all."

"The boys think she isn't coming back."

"Do you think that?" Jim caught her eyes again. Lucy mulled over it.

"I don't know. I'm...I'm too wounded to think much right now. Drugs make it all fuzzy." A shudder as she went back to the puzzle. "My home."

"All the evidence had to go. You were all over that living room." Jim began and her head snapped up. "They demolished it. Everything. Burnt the debris."

Lucy twitched. One tear rolled down her cheek. She thought of that piano screaming as it scorched with no one to save it. What was left of her family burned.

"I saw what was in the treehouse, Lucy. I know what you were doing." He frowned. "But, we can't chase that anymore, we have to move on."

Lucy shattered. Threw the entire table aside. Puzzle pieces scattered as she stared at Jim Hopper. Profound with betrayal.

"You burnt that, too?"

For a beat, Jim just sat there. Forced himself to look at her face.

"I had to before they saw it. While they took care of the house."

"That was all I had left of my parents and Mia. They died for it. They dreamed of saving those people. Getting them justice and you're telling me I have to just let that go! What about Benny and Barbara Holland?" She seethed with tears falling and Jim was too gentle. Elbows on his knees as he studied her close. "That was *them*, Jim. That was my family and it's all gone. Mia died for that. My sister died for this and I have to let it go?"

“You think I don’t know that!” He contained himself. “I wanted it, too. I did. But, I-”

“Martin would have done the same thing, but he would have done the courtesy to tell me first.” She spat ruefully and he shot up. Lips opening and marred with disbelief. Lucy snarled and shook. “He wouldn’t have lied. Even when he was killing Mia and I, he looked me in the face and told me first... Maybe that’s why I let him fuck me for so many years, huh? I-I *hate* you.”

She only said that because it stung him hard.

“I didn’t want this, Lucy, but it’s the way it has to be. We saved those kids. We saved this town. We have to protect that much or it’s all shit.” Arms went out.

“Fuck you, Jim. You *fucking* hero. You d-don't know what you've done.” Lucy heaved a sob and sat back. Sagging. Nothing left. “Fuck you...” She lifted her hands. Tried to find something to hold. Anything to keep her tethered.

Beautiful starlet with all those flashing eyes. Lucy hated it. This fucking game that was her life. The fact that it was painted and washed out and no one saw and when they looked, they stepped away from her and her rot. Wanted to use her until she was ash. Didn't hear her screaming.

Lucy, who could tell anyone how to feel. Anyone. Who could push all their buttons and no one pressed hers that were gathering dust. Jim reached out again and she stood higher. Shoved at him.

“I hate you. I hate you, Jim!” She cried into his chest. Tried to beat on it as Jim held her arms.

“I know,” he struggled with her. Lucy kept saying it.

Hated herself more. Hated that she was alive and beautiful and everyone she loved was rotting. Hated that beauty masked illness and mania. That pretty starlet is less fuckable when her grief bites into your time.

“How about you tell me why my family’s dead? Why they’re never

going to get justice because of me?" She jabbed him. "Mia can't practice and save people as she dreamed and she was the healthy one! Why am I alive instead of her? Huh? How the fuck does that happen?" Hot tears poured.

"You both saved people, Luce, I know what it's like when it's not enough. Mia wouldn't regret what she did and she wouldn't want you to either." Jim, too tender, only soothed. "But, you have to believe—"

"Mia could have done anything! Anything! Jogged a state away then back, but I never could! And I was fine with that because I got to look up and see a star right there smiling at me. I had my sister." Lucy burst into tears again, hands flying.

He let her weep. Held her upright. Barely.

"No one's ever going to know how wonderful and brave my sister was. All the people she could have saved by working, the milestones she would have climbed. The hearts she would have inspired. I'll never understand it, Jim, and I want to hit somebody until they feel as bad as I do! I don't think I can take this!" Lucy was unable to take in air. Trembling too hard. "She was all I wanted... I did it all right and I still couldn't save her. I let her down. I let the people she helped down. I let everyone who died for this down."

Hair flying, Lucy got a few weak punches at his chest with her good hand before collapsing into his arms. Jim's lip wobbled and he held her up by the elbows. Let her sob into his shirt.

"I know," Jim choked and held it together, "I know. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I miss her, too."

"Lucy!" Beverly was clicking down the steps. Saw the struggle when Frank burst down after her. "Oh, dear. Frank, she needs help."

They had to pry Lucy away from Jim because she was still smacking at him.

"I hate you!" She wailed. Face blotchy red.

"Chief, all due respect, I think you should go upstairs. She's too upset for this." Frank turned as Beverly got Lucy into bed. Petting her

hair and hushing her like a baby. She looked like Diane after they lost Sara, that first night in their home without their daughter. Diane collapsed in Sara's bedroom clutching her favorite toy close. Sobbed for hours.

Jim stared at her curling up and hated himself. Really hated who he was. Pain etched and he peered aside. Followed Mr. Crawford up.

"Listen, I didn't-"

"I know, she's just had it too rough and we'd made some progress. I can't have you harming that. That girl has been through enough." He'd pointed to the steps. Jim Hopper truly felt like a piece of shit. Beverly came up rubbing her head.

"I just need to make her some tea, she wants some." She passed between the men so they went after her into the kitchen to continue speaking.

Downstairs, Lucy waited for the door to shut and perked. Sniffing and raw. She dug around a closet and found an old toolbox shoved in back. Turned it over and felt around sharp objects.

"Lucy." A sweetness touched her soul so she rose to turn. A figure petting that same white horse. Hushing it.

"Mia..." Lucy scrambled into her arms. Smelt her. "You're here."

"I'm leaving," she said with a smile that was chilling, "mom and dad are calling. Mom's going to make her famous Christmas cookies. Can you smell them?" Her voice unsettled. Tones resonating too cold. "Can you smell home?"

"Cinnamon and that too sweet icing." Lucy smiled with the force of an atomic bomb. Mia curled to grin as well. Eyes glowing. Shining.

"That's it. You could come with me, Lucy. Have some. Play *Ave Maria* like you always did. Would you like that?"

"Yes," Lucy trembled and felt something wet beading against her nightgown to soak it, "I'd like that very much."

She had no home.

No parents.

No soul.

And no sister.

Mia began to kiss her cheeks.

Over her scent, another wafted. Rust. Blood. Pouring out.

Lucy whimpered. Stumbled back into the bathroom.

“Come with me, Lucy,” Mia held her from behind and kept coaxing, “you could be free.”

“Mia wouldn’t say that. Not Mia. Not Mia. You’re not...” Lucy whimpered and pushed off. Saw the vision decay. Mia rotted there. Opened her mouth obscenely wide. Jaw dislocating. Breathing out the gas that killed her. The horse went too. Opened its mouth and puked bile.

Lucy began to scream. She screamed until this vision went away. Kept screaming because her entire body caught fire. Wet and sticky, she hit the bathroom tile. Saw blood pooling and dripping.

In her fist was a box cutter. Glinting along the light. Lucy went at herself and couldn’t stop. Carved lines and lines and lines as Mia kissed her better. Clashing and violent against her perfect skin.

Made herself a patchwork quilt so all those who were last could still be together under her flesh and marrow. Wrote the names of the dead. *Mia. Logan. Dahlia* burned on her hip. Words peeled back with no rhyme or reason.

Sugar Baby.

Vanish.

Moon.

Lavender.

Zero.

Siren.

Ave Maria.

Plum.

Red.

Bluebird.

Velvet.

Candy.

Dream.

Teacup.

Strawberry.

Starlet.

Doll.

Shining.

Cuts gashed flesh apart and prickled with dripping blood. More words because there weren't enough to explain why this all happened. Why she was alive. Why Mia wasn't.

She ruined herself. Lucy didn't want to be beautiful. And as Mia kissed her cheek, Lucy brought the blade up. Pressed down. Started to curve along her cheekbone. Couldn't stop it. No processing that she'd done this.

Frank Crawford and Jim Hopper broke the bathroom door open. A mug sat shattered after Beverly dropped it to call an ambulance. Jim held her down in the hysterics and Frank covered her bloody nudity in a towel. Lucy wailed and screeched. Mad siren.

Men in white pricked her with needles and all was lost.

Lucy woke to bandages and straps the next time. Snow-white walls and white linens and white everything. Insufferable. A nurse poked her head in and hurried off only to return with Owens. Lucy could only groan.

"I'm afraid you can't shake me, dear." He came to the bed. Watched her pull at straps. "Cautionary measure. A good seventy percent of your body is scarred. Chief says they stopped you just as you got to your face."

Lucy looked aside so he recalibrated. Got soft. Touched the bed and looked pointedly at her.

"What Doctor Brenner did to you is truly horrific and it's my hope that we can stop him from finishing the job. You don't owe him your life." Sam put down some pretense and pulled a stool up. "I'm going to tell you a few things and maybe one day you'll be telling yourself, Lucy. It's important than you hear this."

She glared at the wall. Horrible and clean and white.

"There are people who love you out here. People you saved. They left you all those cards and flowers." He gestured behind him to the splash of color on the table. "Others you saved will honor you by living a better life. You can't change what happened, but you can take control of the future. A future that you have a stake in. These people, they haven't taken everything from you and that's your strength. And what happened...none of it was your fault."

She welled.

"Lucy, it's very important that you look at me and hear this." He spoke so her head turned. "It was not your fault. You're not going to cut yourself again. That's over. It's gone. And you're still quite pretty so whatever you thought you were doing, you didn't manage to convince the world that you're the monster. You never were."

Steady as can be, he shifted to touch her arm.

"Brenner had you convinced. He's gone and his men are purged.

We're going to change things and I'd like your help to do that. One day. But, right now. We're going to get you the help you need and you're going to live again. Would you like that?"

Lucy struggled. Honor those who lost by living for them. With them.

"Yes..." She breathed.

"Very good, I was hoping for that answer." He beamed. "And while the normal protocol is to lock this down. You've been locked up a long time. I think you need some sun. Would you like that?"

"Please?"

"But, after such an episode, we also can't blindly trust you if you can understand that worry. So, we worked out a deal. Someone has agreed to take you into their custody and make sure you get the day and night help you need." He flashed his clipboard so she could read it. A slanted signature that warmed.

Chief James Hopper.

"Will you go with him? Do you want to? Other arrangements can be made, I understand you think he's betrayed you. He wants to make this right. Keep you safe. He's asking you for a chance and you have all the power."

Lucy considered it. Her anger melted and this eerie calm took over. Nothing would be the same.

A nod followed.

"Wonderful. The Crawfords also informed me that your job is safe. When you're ready to return. Baby steps. You need help and that's okay. That's why I'm here. To help. It doesn't wound my pride that you don't trust me after what happened with Dr. Brenner. But, perhaps, we can try. Can you do that, Lucy? Just try?"

"Yes." Came another utter. He gave her bed a pat with the clipboard.

“It’s a good start. Go ahead and rest, lunch is soon and you woke on a good day. Salisbury steak.” Sam stood up and undid her restraints. Let her flex free. Nerves stung here and there. Twitching to make her feel real again. “Don’t fuss with the bandages. I know they’re itchy. And after dinner, we have a scoop of ice cream for dessert. You can afford it. Favorite flavor? I always liked salted caramel.”

Lucy blinked. Right hand stretching and curling in to hold her wounded one. Such a simple question at last made her feel the worst could be over.

“I like...strawberry.”

“Atta girl. I’ll bring it up myself.” Owens put the TV remote on the bed. Left her there to think. Lucy adjusted on her side and stared at the screen. Her family would want one thing of her right now. Justice aside. Regrets aside. Legacy aside. Promises aside.

They’d want her to heal.

And Lucy figured in this pool of truths and lies that maybe she could give them that much.

Notes for the Chapter:

Promise we're finally getting to the healing part after this and Lucy has a lot to do! She and Jim get to settle into domestic life :) Thank you all following and please leave words below if you have them. My tumblr is Alias-B XOXO

24. Phantom Pains

Notes for the Chapter:

Ah!! Hello everyone! Thanks as always. Lucy gets released and starts to rejoin life again with her soul on the mend. Jim is new at this too, but both are willing to try. Enjoy! TW: Mention of past self mutilation and scarring.

Monday. November 28th, 1983.

Sunlight glittered through layers of gossamer. Lucy reached out her fingertips to feel the glow. To let it spill and kiss the digits. Mind elsewhere sinking into endless waters. Felt like a mermaid they were setting free. Fins uncurling against the glittering seas in wait.

Owens signed her release to Hopper's watchful care. Jim arrived in a new flannel shirt and jeans. Didn't bring her flowers because he knew she still wasn't a fan of them.

"You're gonna be okay, honey." Sam's hand came to her shoulder as they went.

He'd wheeled her out in a chair over dry asphalt. Lucy stood wearing some blue sweats with the hospital's name on the side. Fabric she was drowning in. Played with her sleeve and approached Jim with her shoulders high. Owens followed with careful eyes, paper folded in one hand.

"Her prescriptions. They should all be ready when you get back to town. I also got her new routine of care mapped out for the most part. Follow up appointments will be done here with me, not the lab. No one else. And some information to get her physical therapy started so she can play me something sometime." Sam offered a folder to Jim. "Call with questions and let me know if there's anything else I can do."

"Thanks, doc. I got it from here." Jim gestured so Lucy came to him obediently. Looked at his shoes and tucked some hair aside. "We'll be

in touch.” He hovered his hand to guide Lucy to the car. Didn’t touch her because he wasn’t sure if she was ready for that yet.

Lucy smelt his apprehension and buckled in. Loathed the itchy bandages taped all over her body, but that was her fault. Sam waved when a gust of wind picked up the nearby trees. She stared at him. Pressed one open palm to the glass. Jim got inside and turned his truck on. Started home. Wherever that was now.

“Hungry?” He asked after a few minutes of silence. Lucy turned her head and he saw the gauze taped over the contour of her cheek.

“A little.” She peered at him and tried harder. “It was french toast day for breakfast, but it’s not as good as yours.”

Jim actually smiled. Met her eyes.

“I’ll fix that this week for you.” He chuckled and fiddled with the radio. “Figure we grab your prescriptions and get you set up. I cleaned up the trailer. Took time off work and got some new furniture. New couch mostly. It’s not much.”

“It’ll be nice to sit in the window and watch the water,” Lucy said more to herself. “I think so.”

“Yeah?” He peered at her bandaged hand. “Beverly and Frank dropped your books and puzzles off. Couple clothing items you’d gotten. I, uh, tried to pick out some dresses and sweaters. Get you started, I hope you like them. Wasn’t sure about the jean size and had Joyce help me out. She picked out the undergarments. Had to guess your sizes there too. When you’re ready to venture out, we can-”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine...thank you.” Lucy paused and didn’t speak anymore as they drove back into Hawkins. Autumn sun rays bathed her expression in light. Made it shine.

** **

“...And I cleared out some closet and drawer space. I never took up much room there anyway.” Jim opened a few empty drawers and pushed his closet back. The sliding doors were covered in mirrors so Lucy avoided herself in it. He’d already hung up the items he’d gotten

her so she approached to see only after he waved her closer.

A hand lifted to touch knit cardigans and cotton dresses. Simple things with simple structure. No more harsh silhouettes.

“Can I still wear your shirts to bed?” She asked, sounding almost like a child. Jim’s lips lifted before he nodded. Scratched the scruff that had filled in since he neglected to shave much these days.

“Sandwich for lunch?” He watched her keep smoothing a sleeve to feel the crochet texture. Good touch she sought for herself. Lucy wordlessly agreed. “Ham and swiss.”

“Please, ah...Jim...” As Hopper turned, she stopped him. “I don’t hate you.”

“I know, Lucy.” He brought her a taste of ease and started off. “Go ahead and get settled. Change and clean up if you like. Bought some stuff for you in the shower.”

She decided a lukewarm shower might be nice. Maintain the care she needed for all healing stained glass scars along her body.

Lucy went to lock the bathroom door and realized he’d pulled it clean out. *Fair*, she figured, undressing. Peeled bandages away. Only a couple needed a stitch or two. Not like her hand which was between tingly and numb with stony twitching fingers. Pink and white along the pull of thick stitches from surgery.

But, the damage done was extensive. Lucy didn’t recall all of it.

She turned around in the mirror and scanned it all. Even the hard to reach places like her back had been sliced with some straining reach and tenacity. Blade forking over her skin as if to strip pieces away.

Her right shoulder stood out where the Demogorgon left its own elegant mark. Four even silvery scars that curved over. Cold to touch.

Lucy read herself. Stared at all the pink etchings. Overlapping lines that made a point. It was just everywhere and endless like the ocean. New wardrobe would have to be creative covering the worst of it. It

was hard not to get emotional at the sight of her ribs and hipbones.

Owens assured her the weight would come back. She'd be healthy again. Soon. Very soon.

Water turned on low and lukewarm to not irritate the angry skin, but it still burned getting in. She was touched to see new bottles sitting in Jim's shower. He'd found her exact shampoo and conditioner. Soaps and lotions she liked too. Tried to make her feel as at home and normal as he could.

She cried not because of the pain. But, because of compassion. Got out and cleaned her entire body's worth of cuts. Part of the routine to avoid infection.

"Jim?" She called, still hiding behind the door and he was there in two seconds. Lucy lost some nerve. Towel pressed into her front. "Mm, I need help, uh, my back. The bandages. Could you...?"

"That's why I'm here." He took over. Pushed into the small bathroom and she turned. Head bowing so wet black locks could slip over her shoulders.

Jim winced. He'd only seen all these when she was masked in blood. But, now it looked like thorny roses might be blooming under her skin. Jutting out.

"Healing well."

"The ointment is really speeding it. Dr. Owens said even the scars will look less angry once they heal up more." She shivered while his fingertips ran down her spine. Didn't dare look up or ask what he really thought. Droplets of water slid from her hair. Made soft *pats* against the floor around her feet.

"Did I get all the right stuff?"

"Yes." She turned to see him. Damp locks partially in her face. Jim reached up and smoothed it back. Got a good look at her scarred face. One harsh line that curved her cheek like a little half-moon from her ear. Lucy shrugged from his fingers. Not violently like she used to.

"I'll put your plate on the table." Jim appeared reluctant and went still. Lucy's eyes caught a lock on one of his cabinets. All the meds and razors inside. No comment followed.

She dressed in one of his long sleeve thermals. Stole pants too so he didn't have to look at her legs. Had to tie them tight around her bony hips.

Jim stood washing a couple of dishes when she wandered out in his clothing. Not turning with a rag over his shoulder. Sleeves rolled up. Domestic. Doting.

"Thank you."

"Eat up." He'd beamed and went back to finish so Lucy sat down. Sandwich cut diagonally and a sliced green apple. Perfectly cut wedges. Lucy watched his back and swung her sock-clad feet. Noticed two more drawers with shiny padlocks.

He locked up all the tools and knives.

"Do you think I'll do it again?" Lucy asked after a beat. Jim crossed to set a glass of water down. Sat across from her with his hands clasping.

"No." Lines creased in his forehead. Eyes averting to what she was staring at and then panning to focus. Lucy looked at the table. "But, I think relapse can always happen. Owens and I discussed this all. We're just taking some precautions to stop it." Jim worked to catch her eyes. Held them steady.

"Have you taken those pills since flushing them?"

"No." Jim repeated, even softer. "Not to say that I don't miss them though. I do. Get the fucking shakes without them. I know this is better for us."

"Us?" She plucked up a slice of apple and crunched. "Jim, I'm not an addict."

Jim's lips pressed.

“Yes, Lucy, you are.” He said all too sweetly. “You’re addicted to the hurt. Just because you haven’t been cutting before, it doesn’t mean you have been stuck in a cycle of causing yourself pain. Putting yourself in danger. Asking to be hit. Thinking you deserve it.” His baritone changed. “Tell you what though, I’ll unlock the knives when you ask me to. When you know you’re ready. Alright?”

He leaned in.

“Okay?”

Lucy searched him and drank her water. A solemn nod followed.

“For now, it stays locked. I’ll check you over and I’ll watch your prescriptions. Owens asked me to do it this way when I signed. But, I trust you. I’ll let you get to know yourself again and I’ll do it when you believe it’s best to heal.”

A hand shifted out toward her and Lucy eyed it. Closed the distance and touched his skin. Bandages peeked out from every hem of her clothing. Made her feel like Frankenstein’s bride.

Jim held her hand in his. Kissed her cool knuckles sweet as can be. Rose to look at her eyes and stood.

“What am I to you now, Jim?” Lucy asked before he could go. Jim leaned over and pressed his lips up. Kissed her temple.

“Still Lucretia.”

** ** *

Jim’s trailer got cold at night. Lucy knew this well. Maybe it was the fact that she’d become too skinny, but it seemed worse that first evening. Glittery stars twinkled beyond the half-open curtains. Shed some moonlight into the room which put her at ease. Too many shadows moved about the dark.

“I’ll be on the couch, you need anything else.” Jim tucked her in after placing an extra blanket over her. Settled a glass of water on the side table. He started out.

“Jim.” Lucy craned her neck to see him in the doorway. A beat lingered. “Can you just stay?”

“You sure?” He didn't want to overstimulate her with his presence.

“Yes...please.” Hair splayed against the pillow and his belt clicked. Jim stepped out of his jeans and tossed an undershirt in the laundry.

The bed shifted when he got behind her. Hesitated and Lucy instead scooted back into him, arms pulled into her chest. She wanted to turn and huddle into his arms, but wasn't ready for that yet.

Bundled in too big socks and pajamas, she shivered still so he bought the blankets higher and carefully draped one arm over her waist. She melted at that. Snatched his hand to kiss each fingertip. Down his palm and wrist. Even the blue band there.

Jim let her cling and fade. Drugs they had Lucy on made her nice and pliant. Exhaustion took her away. He held her for at least an hour or so. Gave Lucy a little jostle, just to be certain she was alright.

“*Hmm?*” She turned to tuck into his chest. Jim stretched his arm out to make a place for her. Realized how easy it was still.

“Just checking.” Lips touched her hair before Jim peered at the stars beyond her.

“Still here.”

Hopper almost welled and was unsure if it was him being relieved or somber.

But, Lucy was here and that was the only thing that mattered that night.

** **

Jim flopped over in bed that early morning and touched nothingness. Dead space that cooled along the sheets. His entire body sprang up.

“Lucy!” He about bellowed, tripping over fallen blankets.

“Out here.” The soft reply muffled and Jim jerked the door to his little balcony open. Saw her curled up in a chair with the morning sun glittering brown eyes. “I’m okay.” Jim reached inside to grasp one of his coats and draped it over her like he always did.

She gave this dreamy expression and looked out.

“It’s so pretty here if you look. I think so.”

“I’ll make coffee.” Jim kissed her temple and left her to still thoughts. Returned with two mugs before he came to the edge for his morning cigarette. “Omelette today? Gotta run into town, stock the house up.”

“Can I come?” Lucy sipped and warmed her hands on the cup. Sighed. “Maybe I can just stay in the car if you...if you don’t want people to see me.”

“Not worried about that. I just want you to be comfortable.” Jim puffed and tapped his ashes over the edge. “Considering you’re strict about foods, might be best if you do come.”

“People are gonna talk about us. Can’t blame a car crash on my covered body. My face.”

“Already talking. They always have.” Jim turned to squint at the distance. Drank some coffee. “I’m Chief of Police, I’ll make ‘em stop.” He hinted this smile that brought her mood back up. Lucy actually laughed.

“Well, I guess you have a point.” She licked her lips. “I wanna go. Gotta rejoin the world sooner than later...and I wanted you to take me somewhere.”

“Luce, there’s nothing left of your home. It’s completely demolished. I think seeing it will hurt you.” He beat himself up for not saving anything. The Lab worked too quick and he arrived late. Jim hoped she didn't resent him for that.

“I know that part of my life is gone and I know I’m still here. But,

there's somewhere else I need to go. It's a drive out. Please. If I give you an address, will you take me?" Lucy pleaded and Jim shook his head before he dropped his shoulders.

"Alright. But, if I think you're pushing, I'm gonna make you stop." He crossed to her and Lucy silently agreed.

"Thank you."

** ** *

"That street," Lucy instructed, "there."

"Lucy, what is this place?" Jim turned up the road of distinct rich homes.

"That one." She went on instead.

"The one surrounded by police tape?" Jim parked.

"Gate's open and I'm with the Chief of Police, aren't I?"

"Not around these parts."

"It's Lab cover either way, they won't bother us." Lucy got out and started off. Jim hurried to get in front of her.

"Talk."

"I've only been here once. It's Brenner's place."

"Lucy." Jim got hard. "We can't be here."

"I have every right to stand here." She poked his chest. "I have to know he's really gone."

"They think the monster tore him apart. His blood and clothes were everywhere."

"I need to feel it for myself." Lucy marched onward. Wounded arm in a thin sling. Pulled close to her chest per a new habit. "I'm going in. Help me get the door open."

"Lucy, you shouldn't..." Jim trailed off at the look she tossed over her shoulder.

Saw her teetering there in a light floral dress that reached her ankles. A sort of burnt, dull yellow with tiny florals. Brown thick cardigan tossed over it. His necklace still around her throat. Hair down and getting longer. Tired. Drained.

She needed this.

Jim sighed and climbed toward the steps. Looked around before he forced the door open with a tool from his keys.

The entire house was as she remembered. Ornate and embellished. Everything covered in police tape and plastic. She shuddered and went inside the dim space, did a circle looking around. Smelled what lingered of Martin Brenner. Hopper shut the door and watched her dart around.

"Martin!" Lucy's echo shook the glassware. Her chest tremored. Nothing. Nothing.

Nothing.

"Lucy, he's gone."

Jim came to her as a friend. Touched her back gently while she looked on.

"It feels sick that I miss him. That I don't know who I am without him because he had me wrapped in his arms for half my life." Lucy gasped out, tried to hold steady. "It's not fair that he can slip away and I'm left not knowing who I am without him."

She stepped from Jim, eyes wide and full of wonder. Sparkling while god rays slipped between the curtains to paint her in glitter.

"Martin!" She said again. Waiting to hear something - *anything* - back. "No, this isn't right. He's supposed to come out and tell me I'm dressed all wrong. He's supposed to chide me and make me change and hold me after because I was his good girl. His best girl."

“He’s gone.” Jim offered again. Not moving.

He allowed Lucy some space to explore. She padded through a few rooms. Hopper eyed the door and rubbed his head. Wondered if this was doing more harm, he wasn’t perfect at this.

A crash had him bursting through the kitchen where he found Lucy. Jim stepped over a chewed up bag of fallen cat food to find her crouched behind the island counter. Crying softly and clutching a mass of white fur to her chest. The ugliest cat he’d ever see turned its smushed face to blink. Seeming fine in her arms. Settled.

Jim sighed and came to her. Relented when she looked at him so pitifully.

“We’ll need cat supplies from the store.” He decided, pulling her to her feet. “Does it have a name?”

Lucy looked it over.

“It’s a girl.” Martin called it a boy, but never thought to check she figured. “No name.”

“Well, you’ll have to name it and take care of it.” Jim led her from the house. Lucy touched her nose to its head. Inhaled.

“Its name is Amanda.” She spoke, passing Jim to get into the car. He peered back at the house and followed after. “Can you get one thing for me? If I tell you where it is?”

Jim obeyed then left for a couple of minutes and returned to show her an ornate music box. Exactly as she described.

“Is this it?”

“Yes.” Lucy didn’t touch it. Let him set it aside. A beat as he reached for the keys and paused.

“Are you okay?”

Lucy lifted her eyes to see him, cradling the hungry cat to her chest. Fingers scratching its chin.

"It's possible...I can be." Came the most truthful answer Lucy found. Brenner would not be coming out to hold and hurt her again. She wished the thought was more comforting.

Jim accepted it for now.

** ** *

Lucy opted not to go into the grocery store that day. Saw the cars and bodies wandering and sunk down in the truck. Held their new companion until Hopper arrived back. Jim hoped the cat would help her. Give her something to do when the days became longer.

Little fucker already made a home in his favorite living room chair. Stared at him all precious.

"You can rest." Jim turned to see Lucy unpacking bags.

"I'm okay, I want to help. My place too now and when I'm back at work, I can offer more." She pressed her lips, twitching. "I won't push...not too hard."

"You're here to heal, you know? " Jim's arms crossed and she came to him.

"Making a home again is how I'm going to do that." She went for another bag, sorting items. "I'll set up the cat."

The wrong hand went out to set a can aside and promptly dropped it without even trying to grip. Nerves twitching before Lucy recoiled with a hiss. Her fingers seemed to not even clutch it, letting it slip. Jim snatched the dented can up and came to her.

"I'm sorry. Shit, sorry. I'm...sorry."

Lucy had this haunted look. Tremored as if he'd strike her for such a silly thing. Hands came to the counted in a submissive motion he'd seen before. That was Brenner's mark, he realized. A phantom pain Lucy Garland would have for eons after this.

"It's fine. Hey, Lucy... It's fine. It happens." He gave her shoulder a pat. Rubbed it until she relaxed and looked at him again.

"My hand doesn't work."

"It's healing. You're not used to this yet," Jim strapped her arm back into the sling, "does it hurt?"

"Feels like my nerves are being jabbed." Lucy winced and let him massage her arm some. "Suppose the feeling in it is better than nothing."

"Should give you some hope for physical therapy." Jim's eyes lifted to her face. The cuts that were still angry and trying to close. Two fingers reached up to smooth through the curious strip of white hair.

"Surprised I'm not going all silver early." Lucy didn't shy from his touch for once. Allowed Jim to tuck the locks back while he massaged her elbow in the sling idly. Studying her. Barely grazing the fresh scars.

"No, you still look like our Hollywood starlet." He stared so pointedly. Admired her. Loved her openly.

"Maybe in a horror flick." Lucy nudged into his hand. Let the fingertips trace down her chin. Inhaling sharper, she pulled away. Cinnamon. Unable to continue processing such affection, she turned to go. "For my next trick, I'll set the cat up with one hand."

Lucy loaded a litter box with items and balanced it on one hip with her good hand. Disappeared around the corner as Jim filled the fridge and cupboards. A needed smoke break came after.

The cat wandered the deck and had no interest to further explore the outside.

"We're gonna get along, right, ugly?" He mused at it.

Huge eyes blinked. It turned its prissy nose up. Meowed at him and went in.

"Excuse the fuck outta me," Jim said after it, chuckling.

A soft voice muffled inside so he snuffed the smoke and followed it. Saw Lucy's back turned. Body rigid as can be. Phone pressed to her

ear. Sensing him, she smacked it down. Eyes shifting with this vacant expression.

"Who was that?" Jim looked at her hand and met those blank eyes. Lucy looked almost giddy. Suppressing it.

It's a secret.

"Wrong number, they hung up." A mechanical smile crossed her face.

"Oh," he remarked, passing her, "I didn't hear it ring."

When he peered back, Lucy was already gone again. Back into the bedroom. Total silence. One unsettled sigh followed. A little bell tolled as the cat swept his legs.

"Suppose we'll all get used to each other." He decided.

Jim Hopper fell into a routine with Lucy. Made sure she got up in the morning. Food. Meds. Shots. Worked around all the new items in the trailer. Even the ugly cat and its curious nature. They nursed Lucy's cuts into elegant, angry scars.

Patchwork starlet. Stained glass siren.

She never asked for the cupboards to be unlocked and was allowed a razor during the occasional bath with Jim in the room doing his nightly routine.

The first week began to tick slowly. He let her help make the trailer a cozy home again. New furniture. Needed repairs. Even a few coats of paint around the place. They didn't always share the bed. Overstimulation had Jim opting for the couch.

Lucy had sharp days too. Days she had to be forced up and into a bath despite resisting and hissing. Night terrors so bad that the screaming brought him back to war. Days where Jim's frustration and withdrawals from his own pill habits had him irritable.

Always a little harder when those days lined up.

Jim got up one morning going into her second week and felt for her out of habit. Heard water shifting and shoved up to knock on the bathroom door. It didn't lock still per one of the house rules.

"Lucy?"

Sniffing followed so Jim pushed in. Found her still clothed in his shirt. Curled up in a half-filled bathtub with her legs over the side. He came and shut the water off.

"Another bad dream?" He watched her nod and pressed his lips into a tight line. Crossed and wet his own shirt and briefs sliding in next to her. Jim didn't force any conversation. Just put one arm around her. Held Lucy close without words and only kissed her head. She nestled into him and clung.

"Just feel like I have too much blood on my hands, Jim." Lucy watched him kiss her knuckles in response.

Jim got a good look at her bare legs for the first time. Slashes and words lined the skin. From what he'd seen: her back, hips, thighs, and stomach got the worst of it. Only a few scars on her arms and chest.

He knew not to touch them. During an embrace, his fingers slipped barely under her shirt and felt along a letter causing Lucy to stop the play immediately. So, Jim just held her carefully. After a good twenty minutes, he spoke.

"You made it through the first week." Encouragement was offered at last. "Except your hand, the rest of those bandages should be coming off for good."

"Certainly pumped me full of enough vitamins and ointment to last a lifetime."

"We should get something special for dessert tonight." He said. "Anything you want."

"One of those cute, little cakes with strawberries they have in the bakery. A pink one." Just like the one she promised Brenner she'd eat over his grave. Lucy lifted her head to see him. Jim beamed to agree.

“You want to come inside with me? We could stop by main street. Get you some more clothing if you like.”

Lucy let her temple fall to his collar. Inhaled cinnamon and let it cleanse.

“Okay.” She decided. "We'll try."

That was enough.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for reading, a lot of slice of life and healing in this next and final arc. I'm going to change pretty much all of the timeline and just do my own thing as the new year starts for Jim and Lucy. Might mix a couple things from S2 and S3 but not much! Anything you guys want to see? Always open to suggestions and requests for this couple. Smut or not! Leave me some words below or on my tumblr. [Alias-B.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/alias-b). xoxoxo

25. Valley Of The Dolls

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all! Lucy ventures out with Jim a little more as they struggle to figure where their relationship is. Thank you everyone for following the fic. I'm completely in love with this chapter and how it turned out. It's just all Jim/Lucy centric. Tell me what you think!! TW: Scars, mention of past abuse and self-mutilation. Smut ahoy!!

"Need another minute?" Jim peered over at Lucy as he cut the engine. Storefront plants swayed before them. Painted in glimmers of sun they couldn't feel with winter looming too close.

Noticeably, they sagged lower as Lucy watched them.

"Just a bit longer." She decided. Breathing deep. In the nose. Out the mouth. Clockwork.

They sat at least five extra minutes with trapped lingering heat. Lucy swallowed, leaning forward to see Hawkins residents walking about for their early morning errands. Shouldn't have been this daunting.

"We can go in now." A shudder panged her chest before she pushed out. Stepping carefully as if the Earth might crack to swallow her whole.

Jim hurried around the car to see her dressed in leggings and his red sweater. His brown coat tossed over her too. A pair of comfortable sneakers. Black hair shifted and she came to Hopper. Planted herself close to his right with her hands clasped.

"Doing alright?" Jim glanced again at Lucy as they walked down Main Street. Too aware of her surroundings. Eyes darting before she smelled the air.

"It's going to snow some tonight, we should stock up well." Came

the tempered response.

Lucy looked around at the few people going about their business. Counted steps and tried once more to breathe. No one looked at her. Eyes flickered to Jim and skimmed away quick with hurrying feet.

The town witch indeed. Now and forever.

One body stepped into their line of sight with a grand wave and bright smile

“Lucy!” Bob Newby and his special brand of jovial sweetness. “It’s great to see you out and about.”

“Hi.” Lucy tucked closer to Jim if that were possible. Her shield. Newby was a special one. He looked directly at her scarred face and didn’t falter. Starred at her like she was still an Ava Gardner doppelganger.

“Jim, good to see you, too.”

“Yeah, Bob.” Jim made nice and shook his hand.

“I got your flowers and card, in the hospital. Thank you.” Lucy piped up. Jim shot Bob this pleading look to help keep her spirits up and he only smiled in response.

“Just know we’re thinking about you. You look good.” He didn’t say pretty. “Radiant like. Fresh.”

Lucy adored Bob. He smelled like an orange grove.

And it only made her mouth water.

“Way to make a girl blush.” She peered down and lifted her chin higher. Delved deeper into a dream. Felt the crisp air pool around her body and wished to be swept away like a sea of lost flower petals.

“Oh, I try.” He blushed even harder and Jim hitched as if he might chuckle. “I bet you two are busy so I won’t keep you. Stay warm out here.”

"Will do." Jim went forward and realized Lucy hadn't picked up to follow. Instead, she seemed to have moved lightning-quick into Bob's space. Lips poised near his ear with her hand cupped to share a secret.

"You really think so?" Bob only got more bashful. Jim's eyebrow rose as Lucy finished and leaned out.

"I'll see you around." She droned, going around him. Bob whirled to see them go. A brighter smile crossing before he went back into work.

"What was that?" Jim steered Lucy off with him.

"Oh." She cocked her head, not blinking. "I told him to ask Joyce out. To try twice at least. He likes her and she smells different around him."

"Since when do you play matchmaker?"

"You might say I'm addicted to love." Lucy watched ahead. Lingering fall leaves sweeping up into the streets. Jim panned too. Wondered what had her so enthralled and far away.

"Not too bad so far?" He continued. "Still have plenty of friends."

"Bob is a rare exception, he doesn't have a mean bone in his body." Her arm looped into his as they walked along, into a shop. For the first time, it terrified her. Shopping for clothing. Fabrics and textures waiting to laugh at her. Lucy veered behind Hopper again as they were greeted.

Sales clerks only looked at Jim. Only spoke directly to Jim even if Lucy piped up a few words. Smiles twitched at her every syllable. They'd all waited on her just fine before. Flocked like birds ready to peck her flesh away.

Lucy smirked at the irony. She could just joke and tell people birds did this to her.

It wasn't just the scars, they only highlighted what everyone thought of her before this. Strange. Unstable. Barren.

Fabric draped all over a dressing room door after Jim talked her into one. She tried to be grateful. Tried to put on a brave face for him. Fingers skimmed between hangers.

"I don't want to bother with pants if my weight is going to change again." Lucy huffed, trading articles with Hopper. Maybe she was still stuck in Brenner's rules.

Lucy pulled on another dress that went down to her feet. Tied the back and held herself. Tried to look. Drew her fingers across a scar line from her shoulder that curved toward her breast.

She really did look patchwork. Bride of Frankenstein. Sewn of too many pieces from loved ones and enemies alike. Something stark and unsettling. Something comforting too. It felt almost right. Like she was back where she started wearing hand-me-downs from her family. A collage of old photographs cut out and taped together.

Flash. Mia's saddle shoes. *Flash.* Her father's belts. *Flash.* Mother's skirts.

Lucy wondered what she wore that was Brenner's. *Love me.* Considered the reality that she'd eaten his heart. *Flash.*

And so, we will all be together, Lucy thought. She'd just have to get used to this unfamiliar skin. Do it some kindness. Some justice.

An old doll in desperate need of restoration. They could pop out her parts and replace them with new, pristine ones. Paint and spackle her skin smooth. Brush out her hair and polish those huge, shiny eyes. Good as new.

Place her on a shelf with all the other perfect dollies sporting still smiles. Waiting to be played with. Waiting to be clung to because they were something that made others feel safe.

Was she a doll doomed behind glass or one tucked into bed every night? Peppered in little kisses. Invited to the prestigious tea parties.

Lucy wished she'd been played with more. Risking a cracked face or broken arm seemed worth it for love.

"You okay in there?" Came a deep voice after a few minutes.

"Yeah," Lucy undressed and plucked up a crepe number. Pretty emerald green. Fell to her mid-thigh. "Actually, can you come in? Zip the back of it up?"

"Sure." Jim squeezed in when she unlocked the door. Looked up at the speaker above playing some infuriatingly loud elevator music. Hands felt for her back and paused. "Uh, there isn't a zipper."

"My mistake." Lucy pressed herself into him. Arms tight around his neck. Jim went still as stone. Actually hitched back into the wall with her dangling from him. Jim opened his mouth and shut it. Waited as she got close. "You can touch. I don't bite, Jim. Not anymore. They filed my fangs with dolly downers. Play with me."

"We're not supposed to, *ah*," Jim swallowed the lump and tried not to sound like an idiot, "it's against the rules."

"No wandering too far without you. No tools. No knives. Medication supervised. I don't think we put *no fucking* on your little list of rules, Jim."

"Figured it was a given. You're healing. You're not you. You're not in a place to-"

"I can be whatever you want me to be, Jim, that's the beauty of me." She sparkled utterly. Pushed her tits into him. Grinding lightly. "You can dress me however you like. Pose me. Just play with me after, I can't stand it if you don't. All the looking. Doesn't it hurt you too?"

"I just want Lucy. Told that a long time ago and it hasn't changed." He dared to tuck some black hair aside. Lucy decided to prick with a dripping stinger.

"Aren't you tired of acting like you don't hear me playing with myself when you sleep on the couch? Or through the bathroom door? No locks. You could bust in and play too." Lucy skimmed her lips up to his chin. Barely brushed his mouth. Thought to dig her teeth into his trembling bottom lip. "You could hold me down and spank me for

it even. I'd let you. I'd let you put it *anywhere*. Jim, please, just play with me."

"That's enough." Jim wrapped his fingers around her elbows. Got stern which only turned her on more. Eyes smoldering in his while her tongue swept her needy mouth. Jim's eyes fell to her slick lips. He shook. "You're not okay, Lucy. I'm not complicating this."

"Chief Jim Hopper doesn't stick his dick in crazy." She sneered lower so he shook her, not liking that one bit. "He's suddenly above damaged goods. Thinking of all the ways Martin had me-"

"You're not fucking crazy, cut that shit out." Blue eyes flickered and Lucy fell silent. "But, you're not well either. This isn't about Brenner. What he did to you, that shit wasn't consenting. You think I can't understand that?"

"You don't know that. Don't insult me by easing your own consciousness." Lucy mocked, eyes rolling. "Oh, he forced her so I can rest easy. She's tainted, but it's not her fault. Men always do this, you know. It's fucking sexist. As if I'm too simple. Maybe I did want him. Need him. Maybe you can't stand that, Jim."

Jim pushed her all the way into the wall. Held her there.

"And you think me bending you over and making you cry and calling you names as I force my cock inside you is gonna help either of us sleep at night? You think that's coping, Lucy?" Jim felt her squirm as she glared at him. Bratty and pouting. "I trust you, hear me? But, I'm not gonna let you hurt yourself. Not gonna let you use me to do it either because of guilt and shame."

Lucy softened. Brown eyes steadier.

"You don't owe me shit. I forgive you. All the lies and bullshit. Maybe parts of it were your fault, but most of it wasn't. Wouldn't blame you either way. I don't care that you love him. You're not bad, Lucy, you're just hurting." Jim seized and caught himself. "You ever consider maybe you never needed me? Huh? Maybe I needed you. Maybe I signed because I'm fucking selfish." Hands slipped away. Hopper rubbed his scruff. "And I'll fuck you when I know you're not

doing it to hurt yourself."

She shuddered there against the corner. Watched him slip out to shut the door with a loud click. The hard sound made her realize she'd practically ruined her panties.

God, she needed help.

"Try on the next one. I saw a few other things I'll grab. Don't leave." Jim gruffed, almost snapping it. "Figure the zippers your damn self." *If you're going to be a brat.*

"O-Okay." Lucy sealed her mouth. They resumed passing piles of fabric. Back and forth. Jim simmered down. Items were chosen before she hurried to pull his clothing back on. Pushing the scent of him up to her mouth and nose. "We can go."

"Sure?"

"Yes, I have what I need for now." Lucy rubbed her arms there. "The short red one you picked out with the long sleeves. Very mod. It's my favorite."

"Good. I'll...meet you up at the front." Jim hurried to pay before she could fuss.

Lucy pulled her shoes on and snuck out. Almost bumped into Karen Wheeler on her way in. That pretty face etched in shock before a smile flashed like a polaroid.

"Lucy, it's been too long. I wondered what the Chief was doing with all those dresses." Karen tucked a structured curl back. Came to pull Lucy in for an odd hug. Only odd because it was so long. "I'm so sorry for your loss. The boys made all those cards. I brought that casserole over. Chief said you were sleeping."

"Yes, I, uh, ate my fill of it. Thank you." Lucy wriggled out. Hands clasped before she smiled too. Felt a tug on her scar. Karen's eyes twitched to see it. Flicked away.

"You should come to the salon again, we all miss you there. The ladies ask about you. Good things. Only good things. You always

made them jealous, you know? Your fashion sense.” Karen encouraged and Lucy touched her black hair, eyes darting away several times. Feet shifting.

“Yeah, sometime maybe. Don’t know, I thought I’d grow it out. My mother and Mia always had pretty long hair.” Befitting a witch.

“Oh, I think it’ll be beautiful. I’ll come over some time with wine then. Curl it for you?”

“That sounds nice,” Lucy flickered her eyes over Karen’s painted face, “I’ll see you, Karen.” She went around her to Jim grasping bags.

“See ya, Chief.” Karen eyed his behind and Jim pretended not to notice. Lips pressed. The women in this town.

“Karen.” He led Lucy out with one hand. They got to the door as the saleswoman muttered.

“Poor thing.”

Lucy skidded a little to peer back, head bowing as she hurried ahead of Jim to breathe fresh air. Karen shot the clerk a dirty glare and dropped her items on the counter crudely.

Unable to say anything, Jim left Lucy alone to think at the end of the street. Watched her back as she stood obediently at the crosswalk and went to put their items in the truck. Came to her.

“You’re doing so good.” He said and Lucy’s shoulders fell as he hit the walk button. Cool and collected, he went first on green. Lucy stared at his broad back and picked up to grasp his hand.

"Sorry, I'm such a bitch half the time."

"Hey, I never minded it when you bit." He remarked, lip twitching as he looked down at her. "Not a bitch, just angry with every reason to be. I can be a prick, too."

"Guess we really do fit together." Lucy curled back into him as they walked. Hummed and got her head on his shoulder. Let the wind

chill as it swept peacefully and Jim's eyes turned. Careful and deft, he laced their fingers.

The supermarket was busy enough to push Lucy into his side. Although she wondered if Jim wasn't here, if she would be noticed at all. Hawkins residents only regarded him. Their dutiful Chief. Going about his day. So kind and giving of him to take in that poor Garland girl.

All the while, Lucy gripped the side of the cart like some unruly child in time out.

He even let her pick out the little, pink cake. Something decadent they could slice in half. Maybe he'd feed her little bites.

They meandered over clean aisles packed with uniform cans and brightly colored boxes. Pristine and organized. Lucy had the urge to destroy it all. Would they stop her or shake their heads in pity because it can't be helped?

No one looked at her. Would they even try to notice her raising hell?

The clacking of metal wheels reeled up.

"Jim. Lucy." Joyce Byers made a thing of it to almost bump her cart into Jim's at the back of the store. Another uniform smile. Her purse settled into the cart and her breath quick as if she rushed right over. She and Jim exchanged pleasantries.

It was obvious Hopper called her for backup. Maybe while Lucy was in the dressing room. For added support.

Lucy smiled and even felt appreciation bloom. Joyce didn't try to hug her but looked right into her eyes. Not faltering. She was here. She was real.

"How are the boys?" Lucy steered the attention away as Jim went to the back shelf for some prime cuts of meat, leaving the women to flock.

"Doing well. Ah, Jonathan sticks pretty close to Will. Back at

school, but winter break is coming.”

“Important to get back into the swing of things,” Lucy noted mutely, “I think so.”

“Yeah, Will said he'd like to see you again. I think it's cause maybe you understand it. The things he saw in there.” She leaned a little over the cart. Propped her elbows up to sigh. “He talked about you a lot actually. He said...He said had a dream about you. The night you returned to the hospital.”

Lucy briefly closed her eyes and imagined the poor boy screaming himself awake.

“I don't dream much with the medication they have me on. I miss it, if you believe that. It's spotty when I do.” Lucy blinked. “Owens wouldn't approve of my jumping into this. What with his...follow-up appointments. Not unless I'm feeling more giving to him as they tie up loose ends.” The gate. Eleven.

Joyce pressed her lips. Only nodded and searched for more to explain.

“It's all we can do for now.” She decided and Lucy didn't disagree. Jim crossed back over, shooting Lucy a glance. “Oh, the rules. Jim has all sorts of rules, some from Sam as well.”

“No talking about it in public.” He'd muttered under his breath.

“Please, they don't hear or see me, Jim. I bet you I could flash the butcher my tits and he wouldn't even glance at me. We could bet on it, Chief Hopper.” Lucy ruefully undid a button and Jim lifted a chiding hand. A pout formed and she stopped. Joyce's brow rose, maybe amused and unsettled.

“Stop that.” Hopper eased.

“Jim's very serious about his rules, that must be a military thing. He looked damn good in the uniform though, don't you think, Joyce?” Lucy patted his hand and rubbed his scruff, brushing against him to flit off. Dazed. “Dreaming again would be nice. I think so... I'll get there. Sometimes I dream and the rooms are underwater and I'm

left breathing that watery air. But, that's just a dream. The worst dream. My mother used to call them screaming meemies."

Lucy swayed off humming a strange rendition of that "Valley of the Dolls" theme song by Dionne Warwick. Always gave Jim the unexplainable creeps.

"Good to see you, Lucy." Joyce's tone followed her.

"We'll have to eat casserole sometime, Jim's got five in the fridge. Pity Casserole for days and days. Years and years. Growing rank with mold and flies. Now that's a real nightmare." Lucy wandered off into the next aisle. Still humming. Still wondering about taking her clothes off.

"Thanks, Joyce," Jim uttered, beaming. Eyes lingered as he inched toward Lucy plucking up boxes of kid's cereal. Contemplating colorful marshmallows and berry sweetened ground-corn pieces.

"My friend, too. How...how is she adjusting?" Joyce lifted her eyes and he shrugged helplessly.

"Little by little, I guess. Feels like she's not all here."

"She'll come back, Jim," Joyce sighed, pushing her cart to go, "might be easy if you just asked her first. They can say a lot about Lucy, I'm sure. But, if I needed her, she was the first one there for me. Bless her, she never brought me a damn casserole either."

One quiet laugh sparked as she went. Jim sighed after her. Debated it and followed Lucy through aisles in no order. Let her put things in the cart until they paid to go. Hands pulled close, Lucy managed to help him fill the fridge and cupboards.

A distance pooled as he looked at her frame. Recalled that present starlet who was happy to get messy eating with him and curl into his side during romantic films at the drive-in. Lucy petted the cat and approached the music box she hadn't dared to touch. Still on a plain shelf. Lifted it to allow the little dancer a spin round.

Her fingers gave it a crank. Music plucked and piled. Haunting tune.

She saw herself as a pretty doll again that opens and closes its eyes. Seated on the shelf. Waiting.

Days and days. Year and years. Gathering dust.

"Do you know why her eyes are closed?" Lucy stared and felt Jim's blue gaze burn her back.

"She's probably dreaming of something better." He decided. Missing the way Lucy welled and smiled with pounds of sick glee.

"I always worry about how lonely she is. I sure hope with all my heart it's a good dream." Lucy tipped it shut, cut the tune off abruptly. Brown eyes open at nothing beyond the veil. "Not another screaming meemie. That would just break my heart into a million porcelain pieces."

Jim felt himself crack.

A can dented when he dropped it aside to come to her. Spinning Lucy around to pull her into his arms. Held her firm enough without crushing her. Felt like he could so easily, she'd gotten too thin. Still a work in progress to fill the spaces between her protruding bones.

Arms went under his and opened, she froze. Blinked with her head pressed to his chest. Thought she heard pretty moths fluttering around his organs.

"J-Jim?" She managed. Tight and stiff. Eyes huge because a thousand sensations woke up within her heart. All at once. They sang. Echoing tones like a lovely church choir.

"I don't want you to go anywhere is all." He found his voice, tucked her head under his chin. "I don't want to see you bleed anymore, Luce. I can't. I can't do it. I can't see you hurt. I can't watch you float away from me. I'm so fucking selfish." Fingers wove into black locks. Jim trembled there. Held her firm into his chest so she could inhale the scent of his wash. *"I'm s-sorry."*

Lucy gave this whimpering shudder. Tears leaking as her mouth opened. A sob wracked and she had this funny urge to wail and scream but didn't.

"I didn't want to die." She said thicker. Lips muffled into his flannel. "I don't want to die. I think I just wanted to ruin myself to the pit before anyone else could. Finish Brenner's job so he couldn't because he got Mia and I can't live with that singular fact still." She kissed his collar, arms tightening as much as they could. Limp fingers twitched. "You're not selfish, you're just hurting too. Don't be sorry."

They both melted into the embrace. Nerves and muscles lying down with a slow tide. Rolling back and forth.

Lucy came out and pressed against him, mouth grazing his as she stood on her tiptoes to reach him. One arm slipped behind his head.

Jim shuddered. Started to lean back into her kiss. Fingers bunched up the borrowed sweater. Wanted to feel under it. Abruptly, he reeled out. Felt intoxicated and knew this was still him. All these feelings, they belonged to him alone.

Brown eyes welled at Jim, looking wounded before she could stop it.

"I still don't know if...if we should."

"I understand. I do." Lucy leaned out from him. "It's part of the rules."

"Owens might have also advised against a relationship. Jumping back into it, I mean. He made some good points." Jim winced because he sounded like a fucking teenager trying to obey daddy's curfew.

"I'm sure." Lucy shuffled back, eyes elsewhere while she gestured behind her. "I'm gonna clean up before dinner. Get the rest of the bandages off. Save for my poor hand." A beat of quiet staring. She disappeared around the corner to the bedroom before Hopper could reply.

The cat came to him. Fluffy tail swishing. Pug-nose pushed up. Clearly judging.

"You shut up." He said before it meowed to spite him. Hopper ran a hand down his face. Gave it a treat so it would stop the intense

staring.

Lucy returned to dinner without complaint in a pair of wool socks, only one pulled up correctly, and a little shift nightgown. Smooth and clingy to her torso. Arms exposed. Hair down in swooping waves just past her shoulders. Fingers ran into it to sweep the part aside. She wanted to know if he'd look.

And he tried.

Palms edged over the cool, cotton fabric. A dark emerald tone that was a good color against bronzy skin. The sporadic scars littering her shoulders, chest, and arms didn't spell much of anything. Only one jagged word barely crept above the hem of her gown just above her left breast. *Siren*.

Lucy stared back at him and Jim had this thought like she might be screaming there. Lashes batted and she went to the table after grabbing their silverware and drinks. Far too controlled. Took her seat with hands clasped and he came to the table with two plates. Lemon pepper chicken. Corn with butter and salt. Salad full of the best greens and a dab of ranch dressing.

Healthy and neat.

"Thank you." Lucy plucked up her fork and they started eating. "Is it strange living with me here?"

"Strange how clean the place remains with us." He had unlocked the drawer for two knives and passed one over. Watched her pick it up to cut her chicken. Uniform, little bites. She struggled with her bad hand but was too proud to ask for help. "We keep the bed made for god's sake."

Lucy gave this near-silent snort and Jim sat back to beam.

"I also figure you think it's cramped." He offered.

"No, I prefer, cozy."

"Bullshit."

"I mean it," Lucy insisted, "plus we have that pretty deck and the lake in our backyard. I like the quiet out here. The wind blows over the trees and water and sometimes I get the urge to dance with it."

"Dance?" He cracked a beer to drink.

"Yeah, I never..." Lucy faltered. Remembered Brenner forcing her into that couch after... "I didn't go to one school dance, not even prom. Might be nice to dance in the moonlight and just know I'm free to do so for the first time... Can I have a drink of that?"

"Uh, alright. One." Jim let her gulp and didn't comment when it was a good three drinks.

"I never liked beer, you know." She smacked her lips and admired the perspiring logo.

"I know. Lightweight."

"I think I don't mind it now." Lucy mused, napkin over her mouth to stifle a hiccup that made him chuckle before she went back to her food. "When do you go back to work?"

"Friday, just for a couple of hours. Few half shifts until we can get back into the swing of things." Jim said it so politely. "We'll see how you're doing. I'm meeting Owens in my office too, I think he wanted to see you Tuesday."

Lucy exhaled in response.

"If you wanted to give it a shot, we can go out for dinner Friday. Come with me. See Flo and the guys."

"You sound nervous to leave me alone." Lucy gestured with her fork and took a bite. Jim rubbed the back of his neck, elbow up on the table. He started to nod before she checked through the blinds. "It's snowing."

"Hm?"

"Look." Lucy watched him sigh outward at his truck being covered. "I'll think about it. Maybe I can try to brave the store alone while you

have the meeting.”

“Don’t push.”

“Just curious, Jim.” Lucy never specified why. “Owens will want to see me out and about too.” They finished the meal with idle conversation as Lucy stood with her plate. She gestured and balanced their empty dishes with one awkward arm. Jim watched her wobble to the sink.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“You cooked. The least I can do is the dishes.” Lucy clearly struggled with one functioning hand as her other was wrapped and gloved. Hopper got up to finish his beer. Saw Lucy’s shoulders hitch. “Dessert?”

“Yeah...Yeah.” He grabbed two forks and the plastic package. They fumbled around each other.

Too careful like the room was made of glass.

Lucy joined him on the couch and readily settled into his side. Felt Jim stiffen and put one arm around her. They watched some old Marilyn Monroe flick and shared the cake. Took turns with bites.

Lucy and her perfume made him feel drunk. Utterly. Her body curled up into his. As if she didn’t know the effect she still had on him. The hold.

Jim’s hand came up. Fingers threaded to smooth into black locks, down the back of her skull. Wondered what thoughts dwelled within. Lucy gave this little start and lifted her head to see him. Wordlessly came back down to set her chin on his shoulder. This glint of intensity in her eyes that would always haunt him. Jim sucked in some air and snatched his hand away, went back to the television.

Shit.

He felt Lucy stare before she faced the screen and enjoyed the dancing starlet hiding so much behind stage light and paint.

The credits rolled and neither moved. Idly he flicked channels.

"Leave it there." She startled him piping up. "*Black Christmas*."

Jim wasn't a big horror buff.

"You sure?"

"I'm a big fan of Margot Kidder, she got the best lines." Lucy nuzzled his shirt to inhale. He left it there and actually enjoyed parts.

Lucy giggled. A lot. Maybe at slightly inappropriate times. Like a string attached to her back was pulled to set her voice box off.

And she wouldn't stop squirming against him. Arms pushing at his side and chest. Nestling until they both were pressed into the very end of the couch.

Jim knew the game she was playing. Didn't chide. Didn't stop her either because she felt amazing even if she was a brat. In the dim light, she kept peeking at him. Kept wiggling.

So, he decided to stare ahead. Became stone. He wasn't losing this round.

Brown eyes lifted again despite the screams on screen. Waited to see if Jim would kiss her. If he'd slip his hand under her nightie like he wanted too. She thought to suck him off, that would certainly get the message across.

Jim just sat there. Marble statue. He thought there weren't enough cigarettes to chase this feeling away.

Pretended not to notice Lucy fidgeting against him still as if she couldn't get comfortable. Pretended not to notice her arm brushing near his dick. Wanted to plant her on the floor and make her pay for that. Stick his fingers in her mouth. Pound while she moaned so pretty against the carpet. Spread her open until she was begging to be filled.

They used to be spontaneous like that.

More credits rolled.

Lucy came up. Saw Jim flicker his eyes away and he practically heard what her nerves screamed out.

Coward.

“I think I’m going to turn in.” Lucy pushed against his chest for good measure, nightie falling from one shoulder. The little tease crawled over him on her way. “Do my routine.”

“Yeah...yeah,” Jim tried to breathe, “I might stay up. Watch something else. Few more cigarettes.”

Lucy flitted off in her short gown. Fabric shifting all whimsical to the flowing song on screen.

Jim thought to get up for another beer. To stop her and fuck her over the counter. Fabric pushed up her back. Thought to smoke a whole pack.

Instead, he changed the channel to a black and white show and didn’t move. Let the room illuminate from the TV. Soft snowfall out the window behind him.

He could hear Lucy getting ready to slip into bed. Thought of that cotton against her naked skin. Her nipples visible. Scars littering her like lace. Wondered if she was cold or if she burned too. How she’d feel if he pressed his fingers between her thighs. The sounds she’d make for him.

“Fuck.” Jim changed the channel again. Rubbed his eyes and leaned over his knees. He felt fucking selfish about that too.

Maybe Owens was right. A relationship would complicate this further. All those feelings they let pour. Were they just supposed to forget? Pack them away in more boxes.

So much of Jim Hopper’s soul had been packed away into boxes. Hidden from view.

And Lucy was right here still. Heart beating. Opening them without

remorse.

Hopper heard some shuffling and fell back with a sigh. Needed a cold shower. He could do this. Hold out. He could-

"Jim." Lucy's voice was too soft under the TV. Jim's eyes turned before he did a double-take. Lucy dropped her nightie to the floor and stepped out of it. Came to him in a pair of grey lace panties. Stopped to let him look at her body against technicolor. Scars and all. He hadn't realized that her thighs and stomach got the worst of the words.

Lucy didn't cover herself.

"I want to feel good." She stared at his intent face.

"You know we shouldn't." He vibrated even still.

"Not a relationship. Not coping. Not hurting. Just feeling good."

"We said that last time, Luce." He almost smiled, head tilting. Thought his eyes might water because the truth of it shook the world. "And we fell in love."

Lucy stood mere feet away at the end of the sofa. Shivered.

"Was it a mistake?" She whispered. "Was love our mistake, Jim?"

He really considered it.

"No."

"I'm sure we tried not to. If that means anything." Lucy stared through him. Stepped closer and Jim fell back, one leg came up on the sofa. "I do want you to touch me. To look at all of me. You know? I want to be visible only to people that matter right now. The rest of Hawkins, they don't see me anymore."

"Don't say that."

"It's true." Lucy came to him. Dropped her underwear as Jim rubbed his face again. "Give me your hand."

Jim peeked between his fingers and offered his palm up. Lucy trembled when the tips of his digits barely made contact with her flesh. Let Jim trace over scars. Head tipped back as she reconditioned herself to his touch. Jim gazed at her. Trained over her hipbone and gave the side of her thigh a squeeze. Lucy's breasts heaved and she snapped to see him. Lips opening silently.

"C'mere." He gave this little tug at her leg. Beckoned Lucy to stand closer. Let him run his knuckles up and down her thighs. "Okay?"

"Yes." Lucy brought his other hand over. Let him touch her stomach now. Quivered and watched the snowfall. Perfect and sparkling. Peaceful. Eyes hooded. Jim muttered something she didn't catch in her daydreams. Brought her onto the couch so her thighs opened. Positioned Lucy over his chin with firm hands on her hips. Fingers pressed down and she didn't break. "Jim!"

He hushed her with scratchy kisses upon her inner thighs. Drew closer to swirl his tongue once. Felt her legs quake. Breasts jutting when an arch overcame her. Lucy's right hand was able to clench the couch cushion.

"Wanna ride you." She managed.

"My way," came the mumble. "We all want things, Lucy."

Lucy still didn't indulge in this often. Not often enough. He gripped her hip with one hand. Toyed with her breast. Kissed deeper. Really took his time until she began to rock with him. Against him. Eyes rolling back. The facial hair made it rough. Left marks to be admired. Fucking delightful.

Jim felt her sway back to palm him and moaned. Fingers dug into Lucy's hips, urging her to move against his tongue. Rocking on that mouth that was ruining her forever.

"Oh, just like that." She clenched. Thighs giving the slightest quiver. Felt him suck and flick his tongue upward. Lucy cried out against the cosmos. Let it bloom into a glittering backdrop. Let someone show her she was still alive and breathtaking. All of her. "Please, Jim, can I ride you? *F-Fuck!*"

One palm smacked Lucy's bottom in response. Rubbing the pink skin to praise her. She felt him let go and gasped some air in. Shimmied off him and reached back to slip his pants down far enough.

Not breaking eye contact and she mounted him to sink down. Inch by inch. She took him inside her. Sighed. Brought those huge hands to her hips again. Savored how he filled her because it was exquisite. Began to rock again. Arms lifting. Fingers into her locks to smooth them back. Moonlight pooled against Lucy's body. Cleansed flesh to the bone.

"I love you." They said at the same time. Desperate to give the syllables weight and life and air.

Eyes locked and Lucy slowed atop him. Leaned over to brace one hand upon Jim's chest. Felt his fingers caress her cheek. Thumb tracing the swell of her mouth for a waiting kiss.

Lips parting, Lucy found a pace again. Listened to his praise. Reveled in it. Little dirty utterings that made her speed up. She fucked him there on the couch. Let him play with her until she came. Helped coax him along with after. Jim brought her mouth down for another taste. Kissed a couple of scars he could reach. Held her tight.

Bodies collapse together. Lucy wiggled to let him slip out. Legs tangled as her head came to his chest to hear the little hummingbird inside.

"Jim?"

"Yeah?"

"I want to be more." Lucy's head came up. Watched his eyes flicker and soften. A nod followed.

"We're not doing this to numb." He decided and she shook her head.

"No." She agreed. They both thought to go to bed and neither moved. Jim tugged for a blanket draped over the top of the couch. Covered her as she nestled into him.

“One day at a time.” Jim decided. Simple and easy. Lucy nodded into his shirt. Saw the cat wandering near the TV as she closed her eyes. Breathed deep and opened them, fingers trailing across his chest.

“What if I need you more than you need me?” She swallowed. Clearly emotional about such a sentiment.

“That’ll never happen.” Lips touched her crown. “And it’s still okay if it did.”

“It’s not fair.” Lucy came up to see his expression. Peaceful. Fingers tucked some black hair away.

“You’re not forcing me to take care of you if you need it, Lucy, I want to.” Jim held her. Didn’t say anything else. Let her settle in again. Breath of life and utter relief leaving. Let go into the darkest night.

She rose before him that morning. Woke him with coffee and breakfast wearing his shirt. Jim made good on his thoughts to fuck her over the counter. They pushed and moved around each other with more grace. Sharing showers and twisting lazily along the mattress at night.

Lucy rolled into Jim and made sure he was fast asleep before she rose in a little red nightie another night. Slinky and short. Her thighs humming and slick from being wrapped around his hips. She floated out, fingers trailing the fake paneling and silly wallpaper. Silent siren into deeper waters. Staring out through the open window behind the couch.

A ring echoed into the house. Hurt Lucy’s ears until she clamped them with open palms. Willing herself not to hear. But it rang and rang and rang. Jim didn’t hear the wailing. Didn’t hear the screaming meemie quell.

So, she picked up the phone to make it stop. Cradled it close to her ear. Figured she might hear the distant call of ocean waves.

“Lucy?” Garbled voices overlapped. Menacing and low. “Lucy...” It

sang to her.

So, she tremored.

“Hello again, Martin.”

“My dear Lucy...” Static played with the hollow tones. She stood there.

“You’re not real.”

“Are you being a good girl still, Lucy?” It asked. She crawled into Jim’s chair. Let the cat get into her lap. Purring.

“Yes.” She engaged it. Unable to stop. “I have a new doctor. He’s good. Better than you.”

“You let the Chief put things inside you. I’m so disappointed.”

“I think I have to let you go now, Martin.” She droned with no emotion in space. Eyes welling blankly. Across from her, a plant drooped low. Tinged brown. “Sometimes I think of what it would be like to level this entire town. Glide through it spilling blood. I bet they still wouldn’t look. Not at me... And this lust, that’s not me. That’s you. Logan and Mia never wanted it for me. I’m always gonna love you. I just have to love you a little less now.”

“Lucy, don’t you dare-”

She put the phone down. Rose and watched the plant rise again with her. Head tilting.

Fascinating.

Amanda purred in her arms. So she brought the cat with her and curled up in the bed. Allowed the white fluff to make a place half on Jim’s chest. Amusement hitched when he snored.

Lucy closed her eyes and dreamed of flying. Dreamed she was in the wind and trees. Over the cold forests. Sweeping into dead leaves that whirled round and round to dance.

Lucy touched the soil with bare feet. Sinking because it was damp from a nearby pond. Ripples swept. Before her stood a tiny figure in the dark. Sensing her. It turned and for a moment all Lucy saw was her younger self reflected. It seemed to feel her. To see her there waiting. Arms opening to show she meant no harm.

"Eleven?" Lucy gasped out.

"Zero." El mirrored. They shared this dream, terror and all.

A shadow loomed behind the little girl. Hot on her tail in pursuit.

"Run." Lucy warned. Heeding the call, El raced into the blackness. Shadows pulled up, a great wave that became a tornado. Plucking Lucy away with it. Watery rooms that closed in. She breathed that awful tar. Washed up on a shore with a lingering red storm. A white light cracked down and blinded her. Lucy cried out, rolling over onto a pure white linoleum floor.

For an awful moment, she figured she was back in the lab.

"Miss Garland." A small chirp stilled her. "It's okay. It's not bad here." Will Byers. Blinking. Looking the part of a perfect doll. He faced the white walls and continued a drawing he'd been working on. She couldn't make out what it was. Black outlines of endless spidery limbs.

"Sometimes, I go here to be safe. To focus. It's like a Castle Byers in my head. Friends are always welcome." He even smiled so she came to her feet. "You've been here before. The medication makes you all fuzzy, I think. Sometimes, I think it's better if we don't remember certain things. Even if that's bad."

Lucy puffed at that. Came to him.

"Are you hearing and seeing things too?"

"You said you have a place like this made of blue velvet once. Shelves full of different perfumes on the walls. There's a man there who smells like amber and a woman who smells like Christmas cookies. Is that your sister?" Will said instead. Frowning, Lucy nodded. "You have nice dreams you don't always remember. But, you

should. Blocking one bad thing can block twenty good things. I guess we can't win." Will handed her a crayon. "Can you fill that part in for me?"

"Okay..." Lucy swallowed. Helped him color his masterpiece. "Did you see that shadow?"

Will scribbled harder in response.

"Should I forget or remember?" Lucy asked after a moment.

"Aren't adults supposed to have those answers?" Will joked.

"You'd be surprised." She went flat. Teeth sunk into her lip. "Maybe remembering is how I can help others."

"Then, you already have your answer." Will continued. "You help people even if you believe you don't. Sometimes I think having someone's memory close. Keeping it. I think that helps them too even if they're gone. I drew a picture of Barbara for Nancy but I'm too scared to give it to her."

"You're very bright."

"I can focus here." Will shrugged. Lucy turned. Saw the shoreline again.

"I'll see you later, Will." She hummed and he nodded once. Not turning to continue his work.

Lucy let his dream fluttered and rejoined her own. Saw empty perfume bottles and porcelain dolls with big glass eyes washing up upon the shore. She came to the water. Sunk in and swam endlessly to the bottom. Unafraid. Crystalline light opened upon the ocean floor. Lucy saw herself edging low, reaching forth into the shore of another waiting world. Readied to dive in before she was falling.

Yanking with a start up in bed. The dream tumbled far and away. That lost child in need of warm arms racing through the forest trying to find her way home. Where ever that was now.

"Lucy?" Jim set two fresh coffees aside and came to the mattress.

Cupped her face. "Another bad dream?"

"I...I don't know. Little mixed," she let him kiss her forehead as he always did. Thumbs smoothed her cheeks before she fixed her eyes on his and grasped for his shirt. "I saw her, Jim. El. I don't know where but...I think she's alive. I think she reached out for me because she's lost somewhere. She needs help."

"Slow down. Drink first." Jim pushed a hot mug into her hands. Helped her sip carefully because Lucy realized she was trembling. "Was she in Hawkins? The Upside Down? Where?"

"I really don't know. I couldn't tell, it was so dark." Lucy put the coffee aside. "It was a dream and, Jim, I don't know what's real anymore."

Admitting that was harder than Lucy thought. He caught a stray tear.

"You can't trust me," she wobbled.

"I can." Jim sighed. "I do. I've been looking for her and I believe you. Hear me?"

"You have?"

"Flo called me after, you know...she said some hunter reported he got attacked by a little boy in the forest. Stole his gear." He smiled a little. "I think it's her, but I can't get her to come out wherever she is. I'm gonna find her though and I don't want you putting more stress on yourself. Yeah? I believe you, Luce."

Lucy curled into his arms in response. The validation warmed.

"Promise me we'll find her and make her safe again."

Arms tightened in response. His lips fell upon her temple.

"I promise you."

Notes for the Chapter:

Eeeep, I'm really gonna take my time with their domestic stuff before the next arc picks up. Thank you all so much and please leave words below if you have them! XOXO Find me on tumblr Alias-B

26. And The Woman Clothed With The Sun

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all! Lucy sees a new side of Hawkins when she goes out alone. She and Jim make a definitive decision about their relationship with some help from an outsider. TW: Mental illness, dark thoughts, & angst.

Saturday arrived quick. Too quick.

Deep breathing. Smile at the mirror. Jump Jim's bones when he least expects it. Bedroom. Shower. Counter.

He figured Lucy was trying to distract from the task at hand. The third time.

"What do you think?" Fingers shifted through hangers. Back and forth. Clearly rattled with nerves. Trying to piece together a new image with fragments from the old.

Glittering mosaic unveiling itself. Starry upturned eyes to a blinding heaven. A crown of thorns.

"Just grocery shopping, Luce." He hoped the nickname settled her in the slightest.

"I know, but the women around here...The ladies my age. We have a certain...unspoken network." She frowned. "I think they waited for me to crack. Lovely, pristine Lucy in her little starlet outfits. Single in that old, strange house. Walking about with jewelry I clearly didn't buy myself. They say things. Before you came back, I had this reputation. This mystery. Even if it wasn't good, I felt...more in control of it and I'm not anymore. It's open season."

"They all talk about me too." He tried to help. "And I have to play into that lazy Chief bullshit now to keep this going."

"You're still a handsome man with a uniform and a huge..." Lucy turned to see him hitch this sly smile at her over his shoulder.

"...bedpost of lucky notches."

"That's not what you were going to say." Hopper crossed from the dresser to pull her underwear-clad body back into his frame. Lips fell to Lucy's head. She melted completely. "It's a small town, they have nothing to do but talk here. No one wins."

"You still have your merits being a man. If women don't check every box, they're thrown out. That's all I'm saying." Voice lowering, Lucy tipped her head back to capture his mouth. "The batshit witch shacks up with the police chief. I just want something to toss back with. Looking a little put together today is the least I can do."

"You being whatever the hell you want matters more than what they think." His brow gave a twitch and Lucy nodded. "Healing first. We talked about this."

"God, I'm in high school again, aren't I?" Her forehead fell into his chest. She inhaled the sharp, woody scent of his wash and the freshly laundered shirt.

"Never ends in backwater holes like Hawkins." Jim nudged her toward the closet. Got smooth. "Pick something I won't have trouble taking off later."

"Oh, I like watching you struggle though, Jim." A wink followed that. Jim made a sound low in his throat and went to dig through his sock drawer. Lucy tapped her chin then gave a huff.

"Blue or orange?"

"Blue." Jim stopped to scratch under Amanda's chin when she hopped up to nuzzle him. "Not sure you want my fashion advice."

"Ah, I'll trust it today." She pulled her bad hand close to her ribs. Plucked up a garment to debate it. "This will do."

Lucy picked out a new dress she liked that clung enough to make her feel like her starlet self again. Short. A lush blue with sleeves down to her wrists. Opaque black stockings that would cover scarred legs. The garters made her feel normal. Maybe that was bad.

Deep breathing again. Makeup. Hair in loose, swooping waves.

Normal civilian out to run her errands. Lucy Garland rejoining her town in full. Today was the day.

She even had a list tucked neatly into her breast pocket. Organized. Routine. Lucy stuffed a wallet into her jacket and pulled on some booties with heels that wouldn't kill her.

"Ready?" Jim plucked his keys off a hook and she swallowed, nodding. "Alright?"

"Have to venture out alone at some point. I want to work again. Baby steps."

"We'll figure this out. Just go slow. If anything comes up. Go straight outside and call my line. I'll come to get you early. Not sure how long Owens wants to talk, but he's aware you're out."

They crossed to get into his truck.

"Sounds like a dog that got loose." She toyed with the truck's radio and Jim winced. "Kidding."

Frankly, he seemed more nervous than she did all of the sudden. It was real now. Hawkins Lab under new management. Their little town resting peacefully as they ventured back into it. Secrets locked under miles of red tape and steel. Owens was an odd one too. Hard to gauge where he stood.

"Not sure how Dr. Owens runs things just yet," Lucy quipped, "but I'll bet he's easier to deal with than Martin. He has a scent I'm coming around to."

"We can't tell him everything even if he is...charismatic. I know how to deal with these guys," Jim gripped the wheel to pull off. Lucy eyed him, humming. Shoulders fell. "You look nice." Softening, his palm came to her knee.

"So do you." She touched his knuckles with her wounded hand. Covered in a thick black glove that went to her tattoo. Jim donned a nice red sweater under this brown coat and dark jeans. "Are...you

gonna tell Owens we're...?"

"Nope." Jim took a corner and Lucy laughed. "Not a chance."

"Fair enough. I'll just pick up a few things. Wander around until you're back. Then...dinner?"

"Dinner." He agreed. "What were you in the mood for?"

"Wouldn't mind tearing into the bloodiest steak I can get my hands on," Lucy said thoughtfully, remembering. "You used to like that steakhouse, ah, the one back by-"

"Yeah, yeah, *MacReady's*?" His lips lifted. Nice to see Lucy getting her appetite back. "No complaints with that. Unless you're not ready to see a grown man demolish an entire porterhouse clean off the bone in record time."

"Oh, I might find it kinda sexy." She shifted into him. Nose pressed his shoulder to inhale cinnamon. Relished it. "Can we get wine? A bold, red wine. I just think it'd be nice."

"Only if you pick, I can't pronounce half of them."

"Hmm, fair enough." She turned away to grin at the trees swaying pleasantly for her. "It's a date."

Funny how they both smiled bright, not even looking at each other. Contented.

Nerves picked up again as Hopper parked.

"It won't even be an hour. I'll be back for you." He shifted and Lucy gave him this quick, distracted peck. Legs shifting to climb out. Wind beckoned through her hair. One hand came up to try and hide the scar on her face with those dark locks.

"See you soon." She peered at Jim and shut the door. He watched her look around and follow others doing their errands inside.

"She'll be okay." Jim had to tell himself that.

After a beat, the Blazer pulled off to go, leaving her alone.

Lucy didn't bother with a cart or pulling the list out. Stood there at the door and saw the semi-busy registers. Buttons clacking and little bells. Coins being counted. No one greeted her.

This hour wasn't too busy. No one was in a hurry. Leisure days. Residents stopping to catch up and converse.

Slow and steady, she went to the first aisle. This store of people she'd known all her life. Shouldn't have been so daunting.

They didn't know Lucy Garland was a high profile government experiment. Who fucked a higher profile government agent in command. Who killed for him. Who was now a keeper of dark secrets. To hold the peace. Whatever that meant. Felt half-formed.

Felt more unjust.

Not one soul looked at her. Acknowledged her. They whispered to each other. Turned aside. Even left the area when she entered it.

Lucy tried to tell herself it was fine. Just a coincidence. But, the smell. The goddamn smell that began to fill her nose and drip down her throat. It drowned her.

The fucking place stunk of pre-rain air. Pity.

Lucy Garland was a witch and a ghost to them now. Nothing she did, nothing she wore would ever matter again. Her grave was made. Clothing picked.

She'd be drained and filled with chemicals and plugged and painted.

At least the process was peaceful. Clockwork. Years later.

Men didn't ogle at her. Women she'd gotten her hair done with wrinkled their noses. Shook their heads. Pretended she wasn't there. Felt like the town was trying to spare her the embarrassment of existing.

This pity that was obscene and ugly. That would mold to apathy. Maybe rot like hopelessness.

“Fucking keep it,” Lucy muttered to herself. Unable to focus and pick items with the blaring revelation. Too swift to ignore.

These people were probably relieved, they didn't have to handle her anymore. With Jim around, there was some buffer. They could stomach interaction. Choke down the bile just enough.

Lucy could have set a fire and they would have politely looked aside from it. She opened her coat and pushed her tits up. Flaunted. Swayed. Pouted slick red lips.

Nothing. Nothing.

Fucking unreal. She turned down another aisle to stare at cleaning supplies. More chemicals that could burn her insides until she didn't have to smell or taste anything else again. Tiny font read *'not for human consumption.'*

As if she could eat or drink anything good with her damn disease half the time.

As if she'd ever felt human to begin with.

Lucy cackled to herself, kept weaving through aimless numbered aisles. Mulling over oatmeals. Picked one up and rolled it down the way. No one came for it. Poor thing.

Down by the soups, she dropped a can and hiked the back of her dress up to flash her lace panties and garters at a man who slipped around her without even peeping.

Scowling, she plucked the dented can up. Snapped to attention. They wouldn't even look at her to eye-fuck her. Despite the linger of burnt sugar.

He'd get off to the thought later if anything. She was untouchable. Only allowed in taboo thoughts. Sympathy in the form of her spread over sheets. Moaning to be fucked and filled and stitched back together. Recycled into another dirty mind. Another set of sheets on

fire.

They thought of Lucy laughing with no air like the mad siren she was. Infantilized giggling, twirling her hair. Dressed down and spinning aimlessly around a pole in red lights. A doll on a stage. Not a tangible thing, so they're allowed to think it. Just a fantasy. Baring her wet sex with a coy smile that barely reached her eyes. Hands and knees begging to be played with.

Lucy imagined a metal rain of rustic, slick blood. Sticky and divine. She dared them to touch her now.

And they would only out of pity. Pity was the only way she could be stomached. Sugar to choke the bitter medicine down. So they imagined her in demeaning, twisted positions. Her mind was broken so she asked for it. Honest.

His wife didn't even glare at her. Lucy would have flashed her too.

She was really fucking crazy to them. Hopeless. It didn't matter what she did, they'd fucking accept it. They'd grin and bear her without looking. Poor thing. Lucy laughed after them and they went faster. Town witch who could curse you with her gaze.

Medusa reeling to turn you to stone with a single glance.

People didn't care that perhaps the serpentine witch was only protecting herself. What choice did the gods leave her? They mutilated her first.

And they cut off her head. Displayed in all her horrific glory without a reprieve. A shimmering trophy on a mantle. Forever screaming and all they do is fucking stare without remorse.

Monsters. Real monsters weren't ugly and twisted, they were beautiful and they smiled widest. They waited to kill you when your back was turned. They lulled you with the sweetest lullabies before tearing your throat out. They were cowards.

Lucy didn't know if this was fleeting or if she'd just gained a new goddamn ability.

Finally, she caught some gossip through the aisles. Crept around to hear it. Two women and a male employee.

“I hear she’s staying with the Chief now. Unmarried. I mean, can you imagine? I bet he’s just watching her because she set that fire herself. Caused those car wrecks herself too, I mean, it all adds up. You didn’t hear it from me though. They were an item, maybe he can’t get enough.” One whispered with her hand over her lips. Palm to her chest because it was so tragic. So scandalous.

“Think he just feels bad for her. I mean, it’s not my business, but that funny girl was always a couple of steps from the edge. No kids. Working with dead people. She’s ill. It’s all very grim. I don’t know why the Chief would even bother to be seen with-”

“It helps when I suck his cock,” Lucy echoed and sent them scrambling like rats under a fresh light. “You’d understand if you saw it, it’s so fucking fat- *Oh?* Where are you going? I’m here. I can answer all of your questions. I’m in a good mood, I get fucked quite often now. Don’t go...”

A pout formed painted lips. *Play with me.*

"Oh dear, what an awkward situation," Lucy whined and laughed again because people cleared.

Town pariah. Witch stealing all the chubby firstborns for herself.

“You act like I’m taking a fucking shit right here.” Air blew out her lips. Her eyes watered standing there by uniform products of so many colors. She tried to keep laughing, but the sound scratched over.

Lucy Garland died in that house with her big sister.

And they still couldn’t be together. Where was the fucking justice in that?

It was hard not to picture Mia in that box. Flaking and sunken under heavy-duty paint.

Lucy wondered if she would start to peel and chip too. Display the rot seeping underneath stained glass flesh.

What was left of her had been screaming and she couldn't stop and no one would look at her. No one would hear her except those beyond the veil. The bottled souls she collected and immersed herself in. Sparkling little mermaid flitting along a lake covered in flowers. Bobbing with the ripples while her fingertips got kissed by the delicate wind. Dancing just barely above the surface. Lungs filling with water so she could finally sink.

Finally.

Down. Down. Down.

This town would see her caught and skinned and spread under a hot lamp. Exposed and pinned like a cadaver in some museum to be studied with eyes that were selfish and ugly. Pharaoh's tombs disturbed and violated. Plucked apart. Culture sold off to the highest bidder.

Lucy looked around and saw monsters everywhere. This town was no better than that rotting dimension it reflected.

Brenner looked at her. Lab folk looked at her, they did her that kindness even as they killed her. Even if they washed their bloody hands after.

Heels continued by force. Trudged around. Sent souls away as if she shocked them.

She could make them feel anything. *Anything*. If she wanted.

Send them spewing seed. Fucking like animals. Make them laugh themselves to death. Make them kill each other in the produce aisle. Vomiting. Decaying with bile. Broken psyches.

They couldn't escape scent. Couldn't defend themselves like helpless babies. She'd be a god to them. Brenner's greatest dream. Lucy clothed with the sun. Mighty and despair alike.

Maybe they'd look. Reach out. Pray for one caress of her skin. Fear that the warmed layers would shed away with time.

Would they weep at the loss of her? Beg for more. Behold her. This

woman manifesting in sun rays like gold silks. Billowing up before wide eyes. Too great to fathom until minds tear at the seams.

Lucy could make them ill and rotten like her. Make them love so hard they smothered each other. She wondered if they'd catch one whiff of her decadent perfumes and eat her whole. The horror and the love and the beauty and the hate, it was all the same. They couldn't escape her cleansing, acidic lights.

And would she be a god or a monster? Was there ever a difference? They would rot and curse her name for not saving them. Gods let babies die every day and sink the blame because they have to. They are the highest power after all. Gods are not perfect by design, they're perfect because they have no choice. Lucy understood that much. Having power does this to your image inevitably.

Perhaps beautiful Lucifer left heaven because he only ever wanted to deal with the guilty. The damned. Maybe he was just tormented with the blame of it all. Lucy didn't blame him. Let war and innocent deaths be God's jurisdiction.

Dealing with evil always felt more straight forward if you had the keen eyes to see it.

Oh, love me, love me, love me, love me. I'm perfect so just love me to death.

Lucy mutilated herself. Got exactly what she wanted. So she thought. Traded coveting eyes for silent tongues. She wished to peel all her skin off. Become something raw and brand new. No perfume. No Mia. No mourning. No scars. No dreams.

No Lucy.

She could dress up however and tell lies they'd believe. Stitch up a new skin made of pure, ethereal stardust. Unfurl black feather wings and leave this place behind for something greater.

Tell them she got attacked by birds. Birds did this to her. They ate her soul. Left her plucked in weeds.

They flapped their wings so hard, she breathed and woke. Became

a mighty swan herself. Transformed and swept freely over a lake. Snapped at anything that dared to get close.

Lucy scanned and felt further away. Went to the closest wall of food where all the packaged meat was. Saw the backs of everyone's heads.

Hated these monsters with every fiber of her being. Didn't blame gods for not stilling the wheels of fate. Humans could be so inhuman, let us be judged when all is done. If Lucifer himself didn't take pity on her, she'd be fine with that. It would make him an even more becoming master. Lucy Garland was sick to death of pity.

She leaned all the way over into the open freezer display of Christmas hams. Big green sign with a sale. One of her breasts almost shifted out of her little lace bra.

No one fucking batted an eyelash as the patchwork starlet fished the heaviest one out. Hickory honey. Bone-in. Wrapped in yellow netting. Glistening and plump like someone just fucked it.

Left wrist screaming no, Lucy cradled it like a baby. Rocked it sweetly in her arms.

Recalled Brenner putting that stolen child in the same place.

A baby, Lucy, yours and mine. Mostly mine. He would have built her a white picket fence. A castle. Dressed her in fine silks. Hid her behind glass.

Martin Brenner would have played with her even still. His and only his doll. Not tossed her out when she broke.

Lucy escaped to play too though. She played with Barker, and Nolan, and with Connie later. Played with too many souls whose names she never learned. Whose families would curse her if they knew the truth.

A seat at beautiful Lucifer's right would be just fine.

She tried to play well enough. Sometimes the perfumes bubbled up all at once. Made her moan in agony. Made the plants die with

empathy. Lucy stared at all the blank heads pointed away from her. Sunk into the perfumes.

Kill them all, one voice uttered from a cloud of heavenly light behind her eyes.

And Lucy only stopped because an even sweeter voice cooed out of lush hellfire. Nestled inside her heart. *Don't, sweet Lucy. Let me judge, you can rest now.* She'd be judged too down the line. There was something healing in that.

Lucy recalled how she first mutilated herself by making them slice her parts up. The beginning of the end for her in this town. No children for Lucy Garland. She was worthless now. A box left unchecked. Throw the entire doll away. Buy a new one.

Maybe it was really when she let Brenner sink his dick into her. When she kissed him and begged for him and him alone because she hated herself so much. Because at least he played with her.

The ham itself would have fed about thirty people. Twenty-two pounds. Rock-solid and frozen. Wetting the front of her little, crepe blue dress. Lucy walked around with it. No one offered her a cart. Asked if she needed anything else. Stiff fingers twitched so she rocked it toward her right arm more. Got a better grip on the damn thing. Lungs heaving now.

She passed the registers. Didn't even get stopped. Head lifted, Lucy walked out with that fucking ham. Didn't pay for it. No one even glanced at her. Bothered to see what she was doing. Even outside, residents veered around her. Wind picked up. Chilled her poor bones. She shoved into a phone booth and balanced the meat atop the phonebook. Picked up the receiver without putting money in.

Dead silence.

"I know you can hear me, you *f-fuck*. I know you're there. You always are." Lucy crushed in with tears. "I had dreams before you. Bigger than you. I wanted to teach the piano. I wanted to be a mother. I wanted to live a full life as a whole person. I wanted to bring a little girl home for Christmas so she could eat all the cookies

she wanted without worry. She could play with her Auntie Mia. Know her grandparents who weren't perfect, but they loved so hard and they...they were so smart and good. A doctor and a professor of art history. And I would have let my daughter be anything. Do anything! See the world even if I couldn't. She wouldn't be afraid, not like I was."

Lucy hitched this dry sob. Tilted her head against the phone.

"And you just took that away from me, Martin. You think you can rest peacefully while I'm still here? No. It's not fair!" Lucy wiped her stray tears furiously. Numbed out. Pressed a fist to her heart that was bleeding and aching. "I just stood there and let you. I let you pour all the hurt and the blame inside me. I guilted myself for so long and I... It wasn't my fault, but I struggle to face that fact every single day and I...I just really hate myself sometimes. I hate that I sealed my dreams away and I let them suffocate and I let them die...and it's not my fault, but I don't trust that fact yet."

Martin dubbed her a god before he was torn far asunder. He wasn't all wrong about it.

There was a labored breath on the other end. Almost one of lament.

"Do you feel better now?" Brenner asked. Gentle as he could.

"No, I don't fucking feel better. My big sister is still dead. I want my mom and dad and they're dead too. There's a fragment of me that will *never* feel better again." Lucy sniffled and choked for air. "I can't live in that fragment, but I can't let it go either. Maybe my dreams are cliché and maybe I was stupid when I was too young. But, they deserved a chance. We all deserved a chance and you were fine to see us wither away. I just...sometimes I can't breathe through that thought. In all my dreams, I drown. I'm drowning and screaming and they can't see me! They won't even look and I'm *here*. I'm right here! Was it worth it? I have to know! Please, just tell me. Tell me!"

Nothing.

"Answer me! Martin!" Lucy about screeched, brink of insanity because it would haunt her forever. "Tell me! Was it worth it!"

Dial tone.

Growling, she stuffed the phone down. Slammed it until something snapped off. Unable to contain herself, Lucy yanked up the ham and started walking again. The dangerous look on her face kept people steering further away. Heels slapped the pavement.

The wet packaged meat in her arms perspired with dew. Got the whole front of her dress damp. Made her nipples visibly hard through the white lace bra she wore. No more tears. They dried to hard diamonds on supple cheeks.

She actually laughed going down the street. No one fucking looked at her still. It was horrible and oddly beautiful too. Perfect dramatic irony. The ultimate punchline.

Lucy walked herself all the way to the police station. Not a care in sight, everything fluttered. Everything drowned with her.

Plants outside shopfronts died as she passed them. Empathized with her. Poor thing.

She was out of breath by the time she got there, passing Jim's truck out front and went in to see Flo at her desk.

"Lucy, can I help...oh uh, you can just go on in, hon."

Whatever was on Lucy's face was enough for poor Florence this afternoon. Lucy stood there staring. Dumb. Flo saw her. The boys in the bullpen even looked up. Smiled and decided maybe it was better not to ask about the ham turning her dress into a free peepshow.

Stumbling, she went down the hall. Juggled to smack the door open. Owens saw Jim's jaw drop and turned. Almost jumping out of his chair before Lucy came to drop the ham into Jim's lap. Blowing the air out of him because of the weight and shock on his face.

"No one looked at me." She pointed to the Christmas feast. Teetering from one foot to the other. Mad like she might pace. "They didn't see me right there. I was right there."

She wasn't sure how she managed to be so present and not. All at

once. But, the thought of eternal purgatory horrified her to the core.

"Lucy," Owens took control because Jim was dumbfounded, "come sit down, honey." He eased out of his seat toward her so Hopper struggled to roll the ham onto his desk. It would have been comical if her emotions weren't picking up with her now.

Fingers twisted at her skirt and she slipped back to evade him. Head shaking like a child.

"I was right there." She crumbled. "They didn't see me."

"We know that." Owens could only validate the syllables.

Both of them were speaking. Trying to talk her into a chair and the damn phone started ringing. Neither of them reacted and it wouldn't stop. It wouldn't fucking shut up. So, Lucy squeezed between them with a whine. Plucked it up and heard that awful dead static. Hoped Martin would answer her question.

Jim blinked. Crossing with his hands lifted.

"Lucy, put the phone down." Came Brenner's sweet whisper.

"Lucy, put the phone down." Jim mirrored the inflection. Brown eyes locked to him. Shaken. Her lip wobbled.

"I-I can hear the future." She welled again. Unsettling both men. "He knows. He always knew best. He was right about all of it, he was all I had. I can't fix it. He's gonna come for me."

"Lucy." Owens eased the phone from her hand. "You're alright. Just overwhelmed. Let's sit down." He touched her back and took the stronger hand. Sat down with her on the beaten sofa.

She just stared at nothing. Hopper stood over them and rubbed his face.

"What happened?"

"Small towns aren't forgiving, Chief." Owens busied himself checking Lucy's left hand to make sure none of the stitches still in it

tore. "She'll just try again another day. Isn't that right?" Carefully, he also pulled her coat closed.

Sam seemed not worried which got Jim to breathe easier. Maybe he was just mad too though.

"Did...Did you steal a ham from Big Buy, Lucy?" Jim winced, hands fixed on his belt. "Am I about to get a call about you?"

"They just...wouldn't look at me." Lucy blinked a couple of times. Glancing down at Sam patting her hand gently. Thought she might truly love him because he looked at her so easily.

How easy it was to fall at simple, sincere gestures.

"Who was that on the phone, Lucy?" Owens asked next. Lucy's eyes were fixed to a gold band on his finger she hadn't noticed before.

"I don't know, I just go somewhere else." She turned her head aside. Voice tiny as can be.

"How about we take a walk outside, you and I?" Sam was already ushering Lucy up. Jim shifted like he might stop them and paused. "We'll walk down the street and get ice cream then come right back. I know we're supposed to meet Tuesday, but let's get a headstart on things."

Owen caught Jim's pointed stare on Lucy. His hand reaching to touch her and recoiling.

"Lucy, go on. Wait right outside for me." Sam nudged her to move so she did. The door shut. "Jim. What'd I tell you?"

"What?"

"You're complicating it. We took a chance with this arrangement because you and I are the only people who understand that locking that girl away will kill her." Sam made Hopper recall the time he was, in fact, caught with Chrissy Carpenter in the back of his dad's car. "You kissed her. You're pursuing this romantically."

"Whoa. I have no idea what you're..." Air puffed. "Fine. It

happened. We're not..." Jim cringed. "We're just taking it day by day. I thought..." He shook his head. "Thought she was getting better."

"Lucy is getting better." Sam persisted. "But, the progress is gonna be just like you said. Day by day. Good and bad. That's a forever deal, Jim. You told me you wanted to help get her back on her feet. Help her relocate to wherever she's going next. Something tells me you wanna keep her and you need to understand what that means. She's gonna have worse days. Mentally. Physically. If you're not ready for that then you're not doing her a kindness keeping her."

Owens passed him to go.

"I'll have her back in an hour."

"We had..." A *date*. "Sure, go ahead." Jim gestured and waited until they left to pick up some work from Flo. Keep busy as he mulled over his thoughts. The lock clicked and he dropped the files in hand. Slid against the door and cried there.

Because he loved Lucy and he wanted to keep her.

** **

"Jim's taking care of you well?"

"Yes. We have a good routine." Lucy lingered as Sam went ahead once they got outside. She paused with some uncertainty.

"Just gonna assume you're behind me, dear." He didn't look back so she caught up with him at the corner. "He's patient?"

"He tries to be with me. He always has tried with me." Lucy crossed her arms.

"Who is it you speak to on the phone, Lucy?" Owens began as they walked against the wind. It was too cold for ice cream but neither seemed to care. "I know this isn't the first time."

"Jim's always worried about me. I don't need my delusions giving him more of a reason."

"That's why I'm here to speak with you. I'm monitoring your physical health and progress, but where you are mentally ties into that." Owens held the door for her. Ordered a scoop of strawberry without asking and got himself some salted caramel. Lucy went to a corner table and he joined her. Two cups were set down.

"Thank you." She stared at it. Waited for him to eat before following.

"Now, Lucy, I'm not here to share what you tell me with Jim. That isn't how this works. It's just you and I. Confidential."

"You're prying into my secrets. Trying to figure that place out." She spoke and licked the spoon clean. "The Upside Down, the kids called it. I'm sure you pried with all of them. Will Byers most of all. He and I touched that place."

"Maybe I just think you're an interesting woman."

She flared at him.

"They tell you that I'll fuck you if you pat my head nicely because I fucked Brenner?" She watched him sit back. Truly caught off guard. Lucy dropped the anger. Felt shame well up behind her eyes. "I didn't mean that."

"I'm well aware Brenner abused you and the extent." He spoke. "And the others. There were others, weren't there? Boys and girls special like you."

"He tried to shut me out of that. I cannot help you there. And I pray that anyone who did make it out never gets found." Lucy glared at her ice cream and took another spoonful so he followed. "I didn't mean what I said, about-"

"You're very pretty, but I'm a little old for you. Doesn't hurt my pride."

Lucy gave this half snort, sucking her cheeks in.

"Is it Brenner you hear on the other end of that line?" Sam continued. "Does he comfort you like he used to? Try to guide you?"

He controlled your life for so long, it must feel strange without him.”

Owens knew he'd struck a cord there. Lucy brought her cup closer and averted her eyes.

"Are you married, Dr. Owens?" She peered at that shiny band.

"I was." He replied. Lightly grave. "She passed seven years ago. I still wear the ring most days, sometimes it helps me pretend I can still come home to her."

Lucy blinked. Owens gave an inch so she would comply. Equal exchange.

"It's his voice on the phone. Martin. It was wrong that perhaps we loved each other. All that shit aside. It was inevitable and I resent it. Jim doesn't deserve someone who is still stuck in the cycle I'm in. It's wrong that I miss this man who ruined my life. Killed my parents and my sister. But, we had this...understanding. This horrible connection and I can't let it go. He cut it too deep and I got him right back. His act was dead without me."

"Martin Brenner couldn't kill you. Not really. And he couldn't watch you die." Sam shifted his dessert around. "Maybe it is twisted, but you're not crazy, Lucy. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Jim did once after I asked him." She looked up and saw him smile a little softer so she matched it. Lips upturned. "I used to see others who were dead...before this. But with him, it's dreams and it's his voice on the phone. I don't know if it's my abilities, my broken brain, the Upside Down's influence, or if they're real. I don't know what in myself I can trust."

"Maybe they're just here for a reason. Trying to tell you to trust all of it. Trying to help you cope whatever the case may be."

"Why did Mia try to kill me then? When I saw her...she was twisted and...she made me do this to myself."

"Your brain is trying to rationalize the trauma you've been through. It'll get better and you cannot bottle it up." Owens looked at her gloved hand. Didn't touch it. "There are healthy ways to face it and

Brenner is not here to harm you so you can finally get the help you've needed all your life. But, you have to let yourself seek out that help, too. He's not going to stop you now."

"Are you helping me to help yourself and the Lab?"

"No. If you decide you have information that can assist this, it's your choice. We're doing everything we can to contain this."

"What happens if you can't?"

"Can't?"

"What happens, Dr. Owens," Lucy's eyes drew up, almost a hint of menacing there, "if you and all your white horses....what if you can't contain this your way?"

"We will."

"What if you're just ants scrambling, waiting for the higher power?" Lucy persisted, saw his eyes widen. "What if I step in for you and contain it my way? Would you stop me? You know you can't. You can't contain me, are you afraid of me?"

"You're not that person."

"By lab standards, I am not a person to begin with." She sounded out sweeter. "Why start now?"

"This isn't the lab you knew, Lucy." He'd countered.

"Contain it well or I will. I can." Her head tilted. She covered his hand and soothed. "I could do it."

"Do what? Say it." His lips pulled up. Lucy stared through him. Sized him up. Inhaled deeper. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were making a threat. Is that how this works, Lucy? No." Owens shook his head. Their hands pulled away.

"Well, do you?"

"Do I, what?"

"Know better." Lucy panned to focus on him. Spooned more sweet ice cream into her lips. Licked them after.

"I assume you'll calculate that yourself." His smile didn't end. "We need to understand it. This. All of it." Owens searched her. "Starts with trust. We'll work on that first. It's important that you trust me. I trust you."

Lucy seemed to agree silently. They finished their ice cream and she clasped her hands together for the walk back.

"We'll pick this up Tuesday. Your appointment. Get all your vitals and take a look at your hand and scars. See where to go from there. See how the routine is working with your disease." He stopped near his car parked by Jim's. "Is that alright with you?"

Brown eyes dipped to her boots in the gravel. A sigh.

"And I won't have to go back into that place?"

"No, we'll meet at a normal doctor's office for you. It's clear you'll have a panic attack if I push you back into Hawkins Lab. It's alright with me. Change of scenery is nice." He smiled. Encouraged. One hand felt for the stress ball in his pocket, giving it an idle needed squeeze.

"What do I do if the phone rings?"

"If it's him, tell him whatever you need to if you have words and hang up. Best you can offer yourself is the truth." Owens reached out and shook Lucy's hand. She sighed again. Beamed a little brighter.

"Thank you."

"You and the Chief take care until I see you next." Sam gestured and went around his car.

"Uh, Dr. Owens...Sam." Lucy paused, feet shifting into the gravel. "Can I... This is strange. But, can you...hug me? I want to see something."

"Oh? Alright." He didn't seem like a hugger but shifted so Lucy

could settle carefully into his arms. Hands slipped around his lower back. Owens closed the embrace when she seemed ready. Her head came down to his shoulder as he was only a couple inches taller.

Lucy inhaled. Didn't smell *Colonia*. More of a mint scent. Touch of pine. Something warm lingered with that. Amber. Peaches. She closed her eyes and smelled his coat.

"Okay," she swallowed. Coming out to clasp her hands again. Owens let her step away. Blinking. "Thank you, Sam."

"I assume you have a full chemical profile now."

"I had this friend once who...we loved each other a lot. He's not around anymore." Lucy lifted her eyes from the ground. "But, you smell a lot like him."

"That sounds like a good thing." Sam gave her chin this uplifting tap. "You take care. Jim has my number if you need me."

Lucy only nodded. Watched him go before she went into the police station to seek out Jim at his desk. Casually writing something with his head in his hand. Tired eyes lifted.

"Hi." She shifted. "I'm okay now."

"Good." Jim sniffled and cleared his throat. Knew the smell of blood betrayed him because of how Lucy stared so pointedly. His melancholy wafted. But, Lucy did the considerate thing he silently pleaded for and didn't bring it up. "Good."

"We're not...going to dinner are we?" She watched him file something away and stand to come to her. Hands curled around her arms. Rubbed some comfort into the flesh as Lucy lifted her eyes to meet his.

"I don't think it's a good idea."

She sucked her cheeks in and sniffed hard. Lips pressed before another nod followed. Jim tipped her jaw so she'd look at him.

"Do I make you happy, Jim?" She gasped out at last, barely

audible. Fresh air spent to let the syllables go.

“That’s not your job, Luce. That’ll never be your job.” He tucked some black hair behind her ear. “But, yes. You do.”

“Then, I think we should go to dinner and I’ll order the red wine if you can tell me which cut of meat is best.”

“Is this really what you want? You could leave Hawkins if you wanted.” Jim let himself bleed. “Am I really what you want? Even if I never marry you. Dance with you at our wedding.”

“Even if I can’t give you children.” She added. Lips lifting before she answered. “We’ll find another place to dance, Jim.”

“That’s enough for you?”

“You’re enough for me. You always were. I want this. Us.” Lucy hitched as he swooped down to kiss her. Cradling her head and pulling her flush into his body. Muttering that he loved her and that she was enough for him too.

“Let’s go, then.” He grabbed his coat and the door opened.

“Oh, sorry, kids,” Owens smirked a little there. “Question. Ah...were either of you intent on taking that beauty home?” He pointed to the ham sitting on the corner of Jim’s desk.

“Christ. Have at it. I never want to see it again.” Jim took Lucy’s hand. Actually laughed as he pulled her in close. She looked up at him. Loved him. Smiled brighter. “No more shoplifting. Tempting as I’m sure it was.”

“I think we need a new grocery store.” Lucy agreed as they walked out, waving to Flo on the way. “I may have said some vulgar things.”

“And without me?” He joked suggestively. “Bragging, I hope.”

“Oh, I made you look like a god.” Lips touched his jawline. Owens carried the ham out behind them. Comically buckled it into his passenger seat and waved at the lovebirds. Jim pressed his lips and got into the car with Lucy following.

“Day by day.” He took her left hand carefully. Started the truck to pull out. Lucy brought his hand up in both of hers. Kissed his knuckles carefully before she placed her cheek upon the cool skin.

“You don’t know how lovely that sounds.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you guys so so much for following this fic. Due to some horrible anon hate, I recently closed my anon ask on tumblr, but it's back open for questions. :) Please feel free to chat with me below about the story. My tumblr also is Alias-B xoxo

27. Red Skies At Night

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry it took so long to get this one out!!! Fun chapter + the plot is moving. TW: Jim & Lucy get high & smut. A dance and reveal y'all have been waiting for. Other stuff happens too I suppose. Enjoy!

"Oh, mercy..."

Cords stuck. Vibrated as Lucy turned a dial up. Hair flicking while she spun about. Outside, a chill turned the world all white. Snow began to glitter the morning like a sheer wedding veil.

"All my life I'm looking for the magic

I've been looking for the magic..."

"Fantasize on a silly little tragic," Lucy sang coolly, stepping over the couch to dust with a rag over the curtains. Hitting a few cobwebs attached to the ceiling. Bopping around to the music. Free and lively this morning. Hair swinging to her shoulders. *"Oh, oh, oh, I'm looking for the magic in my eyes!"* She spun and froze there.

Jim fixed against the doorway watching. Steaming and dewy from his shower with a towel wrapped around his hips. Too handsome for words as always.

"Don't stop for me." Hopper gestured, laughing before he paced forward. Rubbing his scruff. Smelling of crisp soap and the cologne she bought him months ago.

"I'm such a dorky dancer." Lucy turned from him with a pout. Jim shifted the music lower, shrugging.

"I know." He traded her for a clean rag and tossed the other one out. Amanda hopped up on the kitchen counter. Meowed loudly until Jim caved and fed her a treat from his hand.

"Priss." He went to the coffee pot.

"Just made it fresh," Lucy remarked, balancing upon the armrest with light feet. Jim admired her and poured himself a mug. Topped one off that she'd been drinking too. Lucy swaying against morning light flitting through the lavender skirt she had on. A deep blue sweater hung from her shoulder. Refreshed and comfortable Saturday morning.

"We still have that leftover cheesecake from the steakhouse, don't we?"

"Ugh, *my* leftover cheesecake. I think that's what you meant." Lucy spun as Jim plucked a plate from the fridge. Smiled sweeter. "Jim..." She warned.

"I don't see your name on it." He took a playful bite and rounded the counter as she jumped down to race toward him.

"I'll call the police about this one!" She veered right and he dodged around the coffee table.

"I am the police, sweetheart." Another bite and Lucy caught him. Arms around his neck before he plucked up the cake and mashed the last bite into her mouth. They fell against the couch, twisted and laughing.

"I hate you right now! Jim!" She managed to swallow the rest, sucking one finger.

"Missed a spot." Jim came up for a kiss and licked the corner of her mouth.

"I'm mad at you." She giggled instead, crawling off him to grab her rag and continue cleaning. "Wanted to tidy up before Beverly gets here." Lucy wobbled back up on the couch. Dust particles rained from the curtain rod. Jim scoffed, fixing his towel before he stilled to watch her again.

Lucy free and happy. A good morning. He hoped it would last. Blue eyes shifted to a plant in the corner by the TV. Vibrant green. He'd taken to sneaking house plants in. Odd way to monitor Lucy's moods and health. The song looped quietly behind them.

“Have to go in for a few hours. Three to five maybe, just to keep things together.” Jim paused, eyes on Lucy’s back above him.

“I’m sure Flo will be thankful.” She turned to wink. Teetering, Lucy wobbled again and slipped back. Cried out falling into Jim’s arms.

“More clumsy out of those heels you like to wear.” He quipped as she gripped him, eyes softening.

“Well, I have you to catch me.” Lucy pecked his lips. Slowed and came in for another. “When do you have to go?”

“Told them I’d be in whenever.” He mused, placing her against the couch. Lucy hummed so he went for her neck.

“Oh, I can work with that. Bev won’t be here till lunchtime.” She tugged for his towel. They scrambled. Skirt bunching up so he could yank her panties down and toss them aside. Almost hitting the cat who scrambled off in a huff. Jim chuckled and covered Lucy while she pulled for him. Wasting no time filling her with a lengthy sigh.

Jim’s eyes lifted to the snow tumbling. He rolled his hips forward a few times. Savored the feel of her. Lucy dug her heels into his flesh. Arched to take him. All of him. Latched to Jim’s arms. Felt the muscles flex as he drove into her. They fucked a lot. Always game. Could be the fact that they were free to or the early relationship bliss.

“Let me make dinner tonight. Won’t be a casserole.” Lucy idly drew her lips up his collar. Fingers sunk into his hair.

“Only you can make that word sound sexy.” Jim gave a gruff chuckle. “There’s this, ah... The Christmas party...at the station. Monday night.”

“You hate those.” Lucy murmured, biting her lip as she wrapped herself tighter around him. Already in a haze.

“I know...I,” Jim reached down. Smug bastard. Worked her relentlessly until she moaned. “You should come. It’ll be good to get out. See the guys. They ask about you.”

“Fuck, can we...maybe talk about this after...?” Lucy whined at him. “Probably ask like I’m a ticking time bomb. The town witch. Deranged...” She purred. “I just...don't want to embarrass you.”

Jim slowed to blink down at her. Lucy slid her eyes away.

“Hey.” A hand stroked her cheek. Mindful of the scar there. “I want you to go. I’ll even have a better time if you do. We’re dating, you don’t embarrass me.”

“I just...don’t think it’s a good idea yet.” Lucy adjusted. Holding him so he’d sink back down against her.

Jim dropped the subject. Fucked her just as she wanted. One hand still cupping her jaw until she took a finger into her mouth. Moaned. Eyes cracked to movement across the room behind him. Plants shifting. Leafs unfurling. Petals blooming to pulse. Opening and closing.

Her vision blurred the colors together. A dreamy haze, same at the glow of the Emerald City. She imagined herself walking the yellow brick road in ruby slippers. Skipping to count the twittering bluebirds.

Jim drove Lucy to the edge until she was crying out. Bucking to meet him. Begging for him to follow so he did. Bodies collapsed together and tried to breathe. She pressed little kisses all over his palm.

“Gonna get dressed.” Jim felt around for his towel. Still kissing her. Lucy hitched a tired grin and searched him as he got off. Hissed at the loss of his weight and heat on her. She pushed her skirt down, hummed blissfully, and twisted against the couch. Had this fulfilling thought of a baby growing in her stomach. Blue eyes and black hair.

She frowned at such an impossible thing. Put being a mother behind her.

Eyes slid over a row of cheap, easy to care for potted plants on the shelf near the TV. Seaming to stiffen and dull. Closing back up in wait.

A phone trilled.

Lucy perked and called for Jim.

"Is the phone ringing?" She asked when he jogged back in buttoning a red flannel. Hopper stared at her blinking innocently there.

"No," Jim side-eyed the dull yellow device, "do you hear it?"

"Yes. I did. Just once. I think I want to be sure from now on."

"Be sure to talk to Owens about this, too." He crossed to kiss her temple. Caught her massaging the palm of her wounded hand. Plucked it up to kiss the twitchy fingertips next. "Are you gonna be alright here for a couple of hours?" Jim knelt before her, still holding her hand gently.

"Yes. I have the TV and the cat. Bev will be around soon." Lucy lifted her eyes to his. "I'll be fine." She kissed the tip of his nose and then his brow, slipping back with a gentle expression.

With some coaxing, Jim left the trailer. Lucy waving from the steps. All so domestic. He pulled out onto the road. Stilling to see her smile. Hair and skirt in the wind. Wished he'd stopped to tell her she was beautiful there.

"Mrrrow." Came the greeting when she went back in.

"I know." Lucy snatched her discarded underwear and finished tidying. Showered again quick to put on a new dress that went down to her ankles. Thin, red cotton swaying with the cat tailing to bat at the fabric. "Hey, you. Quit that, silly thing."

A laugh roused so she bent to pet the white fluff, picking Amanda up to settle her on the counter. More coffee was brewed to fill the house. Fingers touched the delicate necklace when Lucy caught her reflection. She looked happy. Looked like more color was blooming back into her skin. Was she happier?

Beverly arrived with open arms a bit later. Pressed blouse of blue silk and pencil skirt. Bright smile.

"Lucy, how are you? We ask Jim every time we see him. Frank misses you around the table." Bev squeezed tight and Lucy only smiled.

"I miss working for sure." She went to pour coffee and Beverly made this motion as if she'd try to help but stilled to let her do it. Lucy suppressed the urge to jump right into begging her way back in. "Cream and sugar are behind you." One shaken hand offered a mug.

Beverly took note of that.

"Thank you, dear." There were a few quiet moments of little spoons clicking. They sat on the sofa with some show playing across the way. "You don't feel too cooped up, I hope?"

"Sometimes. The cat helps." Lucy reached to scratch the walking poof rubbing against her legs. "Jim is home often enough. I try to keep busy however I can. My doctor is...upbeat about my progress. Just a waiting game with my hand. But, I'm right-handed so I'm not...too worried. I can do plenty. It's the piano I miss."

She was clearly begging.

Beverly only beamed in return.

"We're not looking for help outside you, Lucy. Don't rush it."

"I miss you both," Lucy admitted softer, sitting back with her gloved hand pulled close. Beverly crossed her ankles and sipped coffee. A motion her mother used to make that always got Lucy settled.

"We'll see what the doc says and go from there." She began. "I'm thinking...with the new year, we can work out some short hours. Setting up the rooms for events. And the cosmetic part. The paint and the dressing. Frank misses your keen eye."

"No chemicals. No cutting." Lucy blinked. "I understand."

"Just starting slow for you. That's all."

Behind Lucy, the phone rang and she flinched noticeably. Knew what Brenner would taunt about. Ignored it.

All she could do was ignore it. Hope it would end one day. Hope he would stop for good. But, she knew a secret.

That Martin Brenner went to his grave with a promise to never give Lucy Garland up.

** ** *

Jim returned to the lingering smell of coffee and whatever Lucy had in the oven. Caught her curled up on the couch with the kitchen timer across from her. Amanda's little, squished face perked up behind her legs.

"Lucy," Jim crossed to sweep black hair away. Made sure she was napping and not hypoglycemic. The cat chirped at him. Jumping across Lucy as she roused to beg treats.

"Hm?" She stretched, blinking bleary eyes at him. "Sorry, dozed." An aimlessness hand shot out for the timer. "Twenty minutes."

"Am I allowed to peek?" Jim crossed around the kitchen area as she nodded.

"Shepherd's pie. I've had a craving. My mom's recipe was always so good, I hope I did it justice. We made it together often." Lucy pushed up to shake out her locks. Jim observed the plants around the living room. Lively enough.

"Good talk with Beverly?" He'd guessed, opening the oven to inhale. Lucy crossed to remove his coat, grinning.

"As good as can be expected. After the holidays and depending on my health, maybe I can start some short hours." She paused and sniffed his jacket. "Jim...what's that?"

"Hm?" He dug through a paper bag of indulgent treats from the local gas station as Lucy plucked a baggie from his coat pocket. Something wrapped in foil. "Ah, shit, I forgot about that."

"What...? Why is there pot in your coat, Chief? I'm telling Flo." She pulled it out of reach when he tried to snatch it.

“Caught the Hagan boy with it at the gas station. I was in a good mood-”

“You mean, you didn’t want to deal with it?”

“A *good* mood.” Jim asserted, plucking it from her hand. “So, I let him off with a warning.”

“You know, I smoked pot once in my life. The Loomis boy offered me a puff behind the bleachers at school and I wanted to be a cool girl.” Lucy pursed her lips. Chased the particular feeling welling inside her heart. “Let’s smoke it.”

“What? No. I was just gonna flush it.”

“C’mon, Chief, when did you last get adventurous? Live a little.” Lucy shrugged at his searching expression. “I don’t know. I feel...good today.”

“Did you just call me boring?” Jim laughed.

“Maybe, I was hoping I framed it nicely.” She batted those lashes. “Are they rolled?”

“Yes, but- *ah*, it doesn’t matter. We’re not smoking pot.” Jim watched Lucy give this pout before her arms went around him. Gentle persuasion. “Don’t do that.”

“Do, what?” Lucy caught his gaze, pressed closer. Sultry almost. “I’m just giving my grumpy bear of a Police Chief boyfriend a needed hug. So suspicious.”

“The big sad eyes you do, stop it.” Jim walked around the counter with her hanging from him like she weighed nothing.

“Please, Jim, let’s do something fun. Christmas is on the way. Tis the season? Ring any bells?”

“Toking up is not on my Christmas list,” Jim grunted as Lucy wrapped her legs around his hips. “What is this?”

“Not letting go until I get my way. You ate my cheesecake.”

"I got snacks for you to portion out from the gas station to make up for that." Jim dumped a bag out. "Red licorice. Sugar-free chocolate. Fruit."

"Ugh, I'm boring. If sugar wasn't a killer, I'd eat a whole tray of brownies with fudge. Maybe an entire pint of strawberry ice cream with whipped cream and-"

Jim's stomach gave with a comical grumble and she laughed at him. Still hanging there.

"Smoke with me, Jim. Please." Lucy sang, hanging from him as a koala would hang from a tree. "Let's be stupid for a night. I'll pay you in so many sexual favors."

Lips inched up his neck. He smiled at that.

"I'll do all those things I know you like, Jim. *Please.*" Lucy kept up the play, weakening him.

He actually snorted. Brow lifting before he shook his head and retrieved a beer casually from the fridge like her clinging wasn't a bother.

"One joint." He said.

"Two."

"One and a half."

"Three." Lucy let him drop her on the couch in a heap. Jim huffed and tossed the bag in her lap before he flicked his lighter next to her.

"Porch only." He pointed and she grinned, hurrying to put her shoes on. "I'll watch dinner."

"Come out and have a puff with me." Lucy snatched her coat. "Don't be such a..." She made a square with her fingers against the air. Jim faked an offended look. Amused, Lucy went out into the cold and knocked on the window. "Boo!" Jim pulled the shutters up and laughed at the face she made when the pot burnt her lungs.

Lucy inhaled deep. Puffed out. Hummed with the thin joint perched between her lips. Felt a zen wash over her bones. Behind her, the door opened and Jim stepped out. Came to lean against the wood rail so she stood on her tiptoes. Blew the next billow into his lips.

Jim used it as a ruse to kiss her. Big hand cupping the back of her head before he stole the joint.

“You know my last stint with pot was before ‘Nam.” Jim scrunched when he took a hit. “Christ. Hagen kid got his hands on the good stuff. No wonder he was a little shit about losing it. Complained he was trying to impress some new kid in school. Is that how they make friends these days?”

“Teenagers, Jim, we used to be them.” Lucy winked. Let him finish that joint so she lit the next without asking. Caught his eyes and dared to inhale. “New kid?” She blew out. “Who the hell moves their family across the country when winter break is starting? So close to Christmas time?”

“Californians, I guess. ‘Nother brat for me to chase around town for speeding probably.” Jim squinted, took the offered smoke before he passed it back.

“I’m a lightweight, I’m feeling it already.” Lucy relaxed coolly into the rail as he stood up. The timer went off inside.

“I got that.”

“Needs to cool... Please don’t let me eat that entire thing when I get the inevitable munchies.” Lucy gave his bicep a pat. Stopped him to feel it further with a hum. God, he was fucking big and strong and she was such an easy puddle for it. “You gotta eat all the sweets I can’t, my hero.”

“Jesus.” Jim was chuckling all the way inside. He took the pie out to let it cool. Salivated at the sight of it. Lucy knocked on the window to stop him from going at it with a fork.

“Hey! Save some for the rest of the class, Jimmy! You’ll burn your tongue!” She was eager and readied to light the third joint. Time

slipping and stilling. Amanda came up on the counter licking her chops. Jim shooed her away, leaving, as Lucy cackled outside.

“Better watch that thing, the damn cat is gunning for it.” Jim snatched the joint to puff, rules sliding away. “Fuck.”

“She’s the ugliest cat I’ve ever seen.” Lucy’s head fell into his shoulder. “I love her so much.”

“Lemme see your eyes.” Jim held a laugh down when she lifted slowly to try and focus on him. “Gone already, Luce? How stoned are you?”

“Ah, at least twelve. Maybe thirteen.” She muttered into his shirt. Smacking at him aimlessly when he openly chuckled. Lucy came to view the cold lake. Hushed with little flutters of light snow below. The sky began to darken a harsh red. “They say it’s a good sign when the sky is all bloodied at night. And a bad sign when it’s red in the morning. That old rhyme.”

Lucy leaned into the wood to sigh. Lifting the stick to her lips.

“Red skies in the morning, sailor’s warning. Red skies at night, sailors delight.” She blinked, rubbing her nose. “Used to scare me as a kid when the sky was all painted crimson like this because I thought heaven was bleeding. So dad would say the rhyme. Tell me blood wasn’t scary either. He saw it every day and I’d see it a lot too. It’s just life. Always so clinical.” She flicked the joint and puffed before turning to wave the hot cherry at Jim. “I hope it’s a good sign for us too, not just the ocean I’ll never see.”

He took it and stared at her thoughtfully before bringing it to his mouth.

“I’m in love with you.”

She lit up completely. Looked too beautiful. Smiled so bright, her eyes and nose crinkled before she glanced away with a blush. Hearts painted a neon glow they both saw clear as day.

“You’re a sap, Jim Hopper.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“You make me feel beautiful.” Lucy came to her toes. Stole a kiss after he exhaled smoke. “M hungry.”

“Me, too.” Jim pushed her into the railing. Palms sliding up her hips as he stepped on the last of the pot with his boot.

“Ugh, I can’t even indulge in all my cravings. Fucking pancreas.” She moaned at his mouth on her neck. “Hey, I mean real food.”

“I knew that.” Jim pecked her forehead and pulled her along inside. All giggles, they set the pie on the table and grabbed two forks. Didn’t bother with plates. Lucy curled her legs underneath her and dug in.

“Oh god, it’s better than sex.”

“Ouch.” Jim took a bite. Considered it. “It’s *as* good.” She snorted into a napkin. Dropped some meat on the floor for the cat. Amanda came and pawed for more. “Spoiling that thing.”

“She loves it.” Lucy cooed and scratched Amanda’s ears. She peered at her gloved hand. Frowned.

“It’ll heal.” Jim paused after a bite.

“Just thinking about what Christmas time was like before everything. I’d play songs for hours and watch the snow. I just miss it.” Lucy dug in for another warm bite. “What have you done for Christmas these past few years?”

“Steal food from the station’s party. Drink the season away. Lather. Rinse. Repeat.” Jim gestured. “Avoid calls about missing Christmas decorations from everyone’s yards. They always turn up because the neighbor kids like to arrange them suggestively around the park.”

Lucy’s lip quirked at that.

“Leaving the hard-hitting work to the other boys.” Lucy fumbled up to get a glass of water. Brought two to the table. “When did we eat that entire pie?” Jim’s fork poked the tin.

"Shit." He rubbed his face.

"Don't lemme eat anything else," Lucy got up again, gulping water before giving his shoulder a pat. "You gotta eat all the good stuff for me."

"So, what about you? Christmas?"

"I usually spend it with the Crawfords if they can coax me out. We should plan something small, I think that'd be nice."

"Could start with the party tomorrow." Jim lulled back in his chair and Lucy paused next to him. A soft smile on her face. Finger caressed up his jaw before she angled him for a kiss. Flitting off after tugging his hand until he lumbered after.

"Bedtime." She smiled in the shadows. They snickered and moved around each other in the bathroom. Finished the nightly routine before Lucy was face down in the bed muffling a groan. Slipping around in a pink nightie. "This must be what clouds feel like."

"What?" Jim laughed after spitting mouthwash into the sink, head tilting out to see her before he pulled his shirt off. Lucy mumbled into the pillows, feeling around until Jim fought with his pants and fell in next to her.

"I'm just a little storm cloud." Lucy continued, sliding into his body heat until her upper half was on his torso. "Did you know?"

"Know, what?" Jim shifted, rubbing his eyes before resting his hand on her back loosely.

"That I had a crush on you, you know...when we were younger."

"Actually, I didn't for a while." Jim played with a lock of black hair. "Looking back, it was obvious." She pushed at him for that, rolling back over to look at the ceiling.

"You make me blush even when I know what you're going to say." Lucy crawled back over him. Hovered and plopped down to drape her body along his. Inhaling burnt sugar. Hummed to continue mumbling. "Gonna have sex now."

“Hm?” Jim brought his head up.

“We’re having sex.” Lucy didn’t move, eyes opened. “Wait, are we not having it?”

“I think we have a vague idea in that direction.” Jim chuckled again until Lucy pushed up to steal a kiss. Got turned over on her back with a fluttered look. Scruff swatching pink spots on her collar.

“Say it, Jim.” Lucy wrapped herself in his fire and cupped his jaw. Met his eyes in the black. He opened his mouth to question it. “What you’re thinking. Say it.”

“Didn’t want it to get old.” He let his weight nestle into her. Bodies entwining.

“It won’t. Never.” She smiled there, hushed. Red crawling into her cheeks the same way it infected the sky outside. “I promise.”

Jim beamed at her and laced their fingers. Leaning closer.

“I love you.”

** ** *

Mornings by the back window with a cup of coffee and the cat. Lucy could die here watching the snowfall. Eyes lingering every so often on Jim moving about getting ready. Buttoning his khaki uniform up. A pale pink sweater hung from her shoulder, naked legs curling up before Jim tossed a pair of thick socks in her lap as he passed to grab his belt.

“Trying to cover me up, Jim.” Lucy huffed, pulling them on before she let Amanda back into her lap.

“Sure you don’t want to get out? I can grab you. Get me out of more work.” He went to his mug on the counter to finish it. Lucy peered at him.

“Come kiss me goodbye, Jim.” She only smiled sweeter and saw Jim’s expression mirror it. So, he came to her, bent down for a kiss, and pulled the blanket over Lucy’s bare legs. Almost covering the cat as

well.

“If anything comes up...” Knuckles traced up her jaw.

“I’ll call.” Lucy curled into the sofa. Watched Jim grab his keys. He peered back to see her mouth three words that made him smile on the way down the steps. The Blazer sped over gravel on its way out.

It could be restless in their trailer while the hours lulled. Books. Television. Careful mediation. Lucy tried it all. She thought back to all the little activities she used to occupy her time in her parent's house. How she loathed them because they served to distract her from a world waiting.

A world she finally felt she had a stake in.

The thought welled something hot in her belly. Lava slowly rolling to harden. Maybe she was still afraid of this new life. The one she wanted all along. Well, parts of it. Fact was, Jim couldn’t stand the station most days or their needless holiday parties. But, he still wanted to have Lucy there. With him.

Cause deep down it made them both happy.

With a sigh, she lifted and let the cat down. Plucked up the phone to dial.

“Hello? Byers.”

“Joyce,” Lucy swallowed nerves, “hi. I, ugh, wondered if you could do me a favor today?”

“Sure, what do you need, Lucy?”

Fingers clutched the receiver.

“A ride.”

** ** *

Breathe. Just breathe.

Not like she's going to the damn prom.

Lucy pressed her lips and peered out the car window as night fell slowly. Darkening the winter sky a blue-grey. Maybe a tinge of red blooming too. A comfort. A signal of life and how it always moves forward. We have to accept it.

"Thanks," she turned to Joyce's smile, "for the ride."

"Plenty of people want to see you out and about."

"You want to come in?"

"I think this is all you. Go on." She paused. "Karen ran into me at the store yesterday. Still pushing wine night for us three."

"Is it strange that sorta sounds incredibly needed?"

Joyce laughed lighter.

"You know, I actually thought the same thing. Shocking, I know. Ah," she actually blushed, "Bob Newby asked me out...for New Years. Like a date."

"Oh?"

"I told him I'd think about it."

"He's sweet. Sometimes all you need is a guy to make you laugh." Lucy touched Joyce's hand. Felt fingers curl around her wounded palm carefully. Thought maybe their friendship could be alright.

"Go on, Hopper's probably in need of saving in there."

"See you around." Lucy got out into the snow. Boots crunching over the fresh sleet. She paused to see the budding stars there. Allowing snow to fall delicately around her like confetti. Joyce's car pulled off as Lucy crossed the lot. A payphone rang, beckoning her over.

She paused, sighing before she came to it. Cold fingers curled around the receiver.

"Martin." She breathed a chill, touching the glass booth. Frost and fog crawled out from her flesh. Obscured the view of the world outside. Brenner always had that effect. "I'm only supposed to pick up if I have something to say to you. Might be breaking the rules cause I really don't. I just thought maybe you needed a friendly voice..."

She gathered some will. Some needed fire.

"...Terrible thing to be so alone during the holidays. Your soul will find peace eventually. Maybe that's more than you deserve. And maybe it's horrible that I actually want it for you certain days. I think if you get it, then the rest of us can too. Logan and Mia even. And you. That's the righteous compassion you liked to talk about, I'm sure."

"Maybe." He replied over cutting static.

"I'm not going to pick up the phone for a while after this." She paused. "I'm not a bad person. I just don't love you."

"That's alright." He sounded fond. Like he might be dreaming. "I won't change, Lucy, I'm forever static. Would you believe I never wanted that same fate for you?" Lucy pressed her lips, let them upturn.

"Merry Christmas." She put the phone down and faced the station. Heard Christmas music echoing out. Lights that illuminated pulling her inside. Lucy held her coat close and shuffled in, shaking the snow from her waves of black hair.

"Lucy," Flo had turned from a conversation to smile near her desk. The dim bullpen was decorated in lights and tables full of treats. "Hopper said you couldn't make it."

"And miss out on the best party in town?" She caught a few waves from the boys in uniform. Equally surprised but not ignoring her. "As well as your famous brownies? No."

"Let me buzz the Chief for you." She winked and plucked the phone up. Dialed his direct line. "Hop, there's a gift out here for you... I

don't know, come get it yourself. I'm off the clock." She clicked the line down as Lucy pulled her coat off. Footsteps halted behind her from the side hallway.

Jim blinked. Seemed to realize she was there. They both smiled. Lucy smoothed out a green patterned dress. Black tights to match her gloved hand. Stunning in the multi-colored glow around her.

"Maybe now he'll stop being a Grinch in his office," Flo remarked with a smile.

"Thank you, Flo." Jim about rolled his eyes and came to Lucy. "You look nice."

She blushed there.

"Hungry?"

"Starved. Took my shot so I might perish without a sweet." She peered at the chattering groups and came up on her toes to steal a kiss. Jim offered a hand that Lucy curled hers into. Both beaming before he brought her into the bullpen.

Couple introductions. Smiles and chatter.

"You remember Lucy? My girlfriend." He kept saying that. A period at the end of a sentence. She got pleasant smiles. Compliments on her hair and make-up. People seemed cautious but willing. Jim's arm stayed loose around her waist. They lingered near the treats where she got her share of dinner and sipped water from the cooler.

"Your girlfriend." She mused. "Feel like a teen again. Going steady."

"Yeah?" Jim brightened there in the dim light. A festive shine on his badge. Music changed to Doris Day's rendition of "I'll Be Home for Christmas." Hopper got this funny look and changed his tone.

"You wanna dance?" He exhaled there. Dead serious. Lucy snorted at him. Cheeks heating again.

"No one's dancing, Jim." She got her hand tugged.

"So?"

"Jim, I don't know how."

"It's not hard." He pulled her out, got one arm around his neck. Lucy darted her eyes around. Swayed into him as he moved side to side. "You're already a professional."

Callahan got the idea and brought his wife out with Powell and other couples following. Flo lifted her drink to Jim with a smile and wink. Got one in return. Couples dancing made Lucy settle. Including her into the world's center again.

Lucy glowed there. Never having been to prom or any dance. One chance to make up for that had her eyes watering. Slowly, she nestled her head into Jim's shoulder, arms around him. Total peace. Nothing could have been this beautiful. Behind Jim, she saw her family. Mia. Logan. Everything.

They seemed happy for her. She could feel happy for herself too.

"I love you." She mumbled into Jim's ear. Dreaming like she knew what heaven looked like. He pulled her closer in response. They were each other's family now. A precious thing they both struggled with for so many years. Lucy let herself touch this miraculous light and hold it. Stars she could bring to her lips and kiss until they were bursting all colors.

One sniffle and she came out to see Jim's blue eyes.

"Hm?" He saw words dawn she didn't share.

"I just..." Lucy inhaled quietly. "For the first time, I feel free." She blinked. All red skies at night. "I believe it. I'm happy."

"I was hoping you would be here. Get ready for this move now." He dipped her playfully. Let her spin slow under his arm. Laced their hands and swayed together. Lucy kissed his cheek with a brighter smile. Enjoyed the night as they wound down.

"You wanna get out of here?" Jim spoke another hour later. Lucy perked as she sided out of a conversation to nod. "I wanted to show

you something.”

“Oh?”

“Get your coat,” Jim muttered into her hairline, passing to go. He returned with a Tupperware container. Settling his hat and jacket on. Zipping.

Lucy floated off. Grabbed her coat and spied the bulletin board. Stories of Will Byers. Corrupt state troopers. An arrest at the coroners. Things were shifting in the world. Falling where they were supposed to. She hoped.

“You two leaving already, Chief?” Powell piped up.

“Oh, come on, you think we actually wanted to come to this thing? We were just hungry is all.” He snapped a full container of treats shut. Lucy chuckled as he crossed to her, already puffing a freshly lit cigarette.

“Uh, hey Chief, mistletoe.” Callahan pointed. Everyone turned to them peering up at it in the doorway. Flo snagged Jim’s cigarette.

“Kiss already, Hop, and Merry Christmas.” She patted Jim’s chest and Lucy’s arm on the way to her desk.

Jim swept down, pulled Lucy up into him, and smacked a lovely kiss into her mouth. Arms went around his neck as she curved back. Garnered a few whistles and hollers. She stole the Tupperware and flicked her hair to go off first.

“Night, everyone.” She called back as Jim pushed the door open. They went out into the frost. Jim’s hand on the small of Lucy’s back.

Strange how a night could feel so magical even when you grow up. Those old pieces of yourself that believed in fairy dust and wishing on stars. They weren't lost. Sometimes they get misplaced and you need the reminder. As Lucy walked along and looked at Jim. This soul she loved so profoundly. She realized she wouldn't forget again.

And that was a gift she returned.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s hard to explain. Trust me.” He unlocked his Blazer. Got them warmed before he pulled out.

The radio picked up a soft song as Lucy craned to see the dark path ahead. They went into the forested streets, down a road with no lighting. Only Jim’s truck paving the way. He eventually pulled off the side of the trees.

“Here, put these on.” He pulled some large gloves from his pocket. “Follow me and bring the food.”

“Jim, what is this?” Lucy got out into the freezing cold. Pulled her coat closed. He clicked a flashlight on and reached out for her hand.

A wordless gesture she would always accept.

“This way.” They moved into the forest. Over thrush and snow. Lucy puffed and drew closer to Jim. He paused and swept fresh snow off a sleek box, crouching. It dawned.

“You’re trying to draw her out.” Lucy watched him nod, eyes scanning as she took the flashlight when he offered it to put the gathered food in the box. “She won’t survive winter alone.”

“We’ll find her.” Jim had promised.

“Have you been doing this the whole time?”

“Yes, I told you I believed you, Luce. You’re healing, I didn’t want to worry you too much.” Jim stood taller, ran his hand across her back. “C’mom.”

Lucy took some coaxing to go off with him. Back down the way toward his Blazer. She inhaled the cold and pine. Smelt the dirt. And something else picked up that made her stop at the same time. Anticipation. A swelter of campfire followed by tart berries. Fear.

"Luce?"

Sniffling rustic blood, she shuddered as Jim turned to see her looking

around. Light footsteps rushed and stumbled over snow before a figure came from the trees. Tiny and dirty. Blinking at them. Too nervous to come closer.

The linger of a dark red sky above them cast. Jim pulled his hat off as Lucy hitched a breathless gasp. Finally. Pieces shifted back together. Exactly where they should be.

“El?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks so much for sticking with me. Comment below or chat with me on tumblr, Alias-B. xoxo :)

28. Technically, Missing

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey, guys! Any of you still with me? I've been working a lot since I left tumblr. Frankly, I thought a few times about returning but I'm really not there yet. :/ I'm so so so sorry that I've had to put this fic on the backburner. Life and mental health got in the way. Frankly, its reception also has me down but know I put a lot into it. Ah, well. I hope everyone is gearing up for season 4, fingers crossed it's a great one.

I really do appreciate those who have sent me love and I hope you enjoy this chapter. I had a third arc I wanted to do but I don't think I have it in me and I'm sorry about that. I'm still streamlining it some and reworking things to give Jim and Lucy the right ending. The ending they deserve. Might be another chapter or two after this one. Seriously, thank you and please leave words if you have them xoxo

Jim and Lucy disagree on how to help El after finding her. Lucy has a frank session with Sam that leads to a narrative spinning choice. TW: Mental health talk and past trauma.

“Can you see her?” Lucy had asked it a second time. Not turning to glance at Jim, she lifted an aimless hand to wave. “Is she real?”

“Yeah,” Jim swallowed. Lucy’s feet hurried toward the little girl on instinct. El skidded back behind a tree and she stopped.

“Hey,” Lucy quieted, hands out. “It’s okay. I know you’re still nervous around me. But, we’ll protect you. Alright?”

“Not safe,” El croaked, rubbing at her dirty face. Voice raspy and soft.

"It's not safe out here." Lucy nodded. "Jim and I. We can make you safe. Get you warm."

"Papa..."

"He's not around anymore," Lucy frowned, tried not to seem as if she were mourning.

"You don't believe that." El, for a moment, sounded like an adult. Sounded like she knew how the world worked. "You and Papa. Together."

"El, I promise you." Lucy managed one weighted step. "All I want is you safe and away from him. He's the bad man to both of us."

"Mia. Nice doctor."

Lucy stood straighter. Eyes watering. El knew what she would say.

"She's not around anymore either. Because of Papa. Because he punished us. Mia would want you to come with Jim and I. Remember, she wanted you to find me."

El seemed to agree with that as Jim came to Lucy's side. She staggered down the hill and doubled over. Straight into Lucy's arms and she fell to one knee. El pushed at her with instinctive panic. Sweating now that she was up close.

"Jim, I think she has a fever." Lucy lifted El up. The girl weighed about as much as the damn cat.

"Don't strain your hand, I got her." He took El's sniffling frame and they put her in the back seat. Jim pulled off his outer layer while Lucy grabbed blankets from the trunk. She got El half in her lap so Jim pulled back onto the road.

"Stay down, El," he gruffed, eyes darting.

"It's okay, I won't hurt you. I promise you're safe with us. It's alright to be afraid, but..." Lucy touched El's head and sighed elsewhere. "I'm not like Papa. He can't get you if you're with me."

“Promise?” El tried to be hard as Lucy looked down at her.

“I promise.” She peered up. “Jim, she’s been in a sterile environment all her life. She’s gonna get worse.”

“I’m thinking,” he turned a corner. “I have my cabin.”

“Your cabin?”

“We can clean it up. Build traps.”

“She’s too sick.”

“We’ll take her to the trailer. Hide her there and get her healthy. I’ll clean up the cabin. We’ll find a night and move her. You two are in more danger together.”

“I don’t agree with you. I’m staying with her,” Lucy cut back in. Jim sighed. This wasn’t going to be easy.

“Let’s just get her healthy and we’ll discuss this later,” he recalibrated. Lucy narrowed on him, not replying. They drove in silence back to Jim’s trailer. Sneaking El inside before every door was locked and all the curtains were drawn.

Amanda stood on the counter, watching carefully. Not bothered by what other animals perceived to be monsters because she lived with Brenner before them.

“She needs washed up.” Lucy led El away into the bathroom. “Will you be alright?” She started the water for El and turned to see the girl holding herself. “Go ahead and clean up. Scrub all the filth off and I’ll be back.”

“Don’t trust you.” El stared with dark and hard eyes. Almost pouting it.

Lucy exhaled out her nose.

“That’s fine. Maybe I don’t trust you either,” she quipped. “But, you’re sick and you’re dirty. So, clean up and we’ll work on trust later.” Lucy left her alone in the bathroom. “Mia rubbed off on her.

Always telling people every blunt thought in her head.”

It was late but both of them needed hot coffee badly. Jim stared at Lucy’s back.

“I’m going to install some extra locks. We can sleep in the living room, let her have the bed tonight. She needs one.” Jim ran a hand into his hair, tossing his belt and holster on the table. The clicking turned Lucy’s attention. “Tomorrow, I’m teaching you how to use this.”

Lucy came to the counter. Placed her hands on the surface. Matched him across the way.

“I don’t need a gun to kill anyone, Jim. You know that,” she replied. Eerily calm about it. Jim studied her.

“Listen, I know you can play your mind games-”

“Games, yes. You haven’t seen me do it. Really do it. Martin trained me. He only settles for my best and I gave it every time. I stood to his right. I did. If something threatens this house, I will take care of it. I already told Owens that much.”

“And I don’t want you resorting,” he paused carefully, “to that *thing* you do. Someone points a gun at you-”

“And I can have them pointing it at their own eye socket faster. A gun in your hand only makes me all the more dangerous. Because, Jim, I am powerful and in control and dangerous even if you try to skirt around that because you saw me climb a few trees as a child. We both saw horrible things.” Lucy reasoned lower, head turned to hear the water still running. “If someone comes after you or El, their life is mine. I’m a killer. I’m built for it.”

“Brenner put that in your head, it’s not you.” Jim’s shoulders dropped. “You’re still the girl who climbed those trees with leaves in her hair. Forgive me for not wanting you to resort to that. You think I don’t know that it hurts you?”

“Martin was horrible, but he was right about a lot.” Lucy frowned. The cat jumped up on the counter between them, breaking some

tension as Lucy smoothed the white fur. Feeding her a treat while Jim got coffees poured. "I know you're just being careful but if my back is to the wall... I'm doing everything I can to protect the people I love. It's not all on you."

She crossed around the counter to lean next to him, sipping from the hot mug.

"I don't like it when you call him, Martin," Jim replied instead in a different tone. Not looking at her. "Sounds so—"

"Human..." Lucy shrugged.

"He's a monster." Jim met those brown eyes. Wondered how she could be so attached. What Brenner did to needle under Lucy's skin. How he earned her love, destructive as it was.

"All monsters are human, Jim," she said, settling her mug aside. "They're not all ugly and covered in fur. They can be handsome and wear expensive suits and fancy cologne. They can hold you all the same, it's easier to get your teeth in something if you're holding it. But, we're moving forward and that little girl needs us. We're doing this. We. Not just you. Don't push me out."

Jim's jaw twitched before he nodded, fingers curling as Lucy found his hand on the counter.

"This thing we have now. We can build something with it." She lifted to kiss him, forehead tumbling to Jim's shoulder. His wash and the coffee mingling into her senses. Along with smoked cinnamon.

"The couch pulls out, I'll set it up." Jim left his coffee there and went around. Lucy crossed back to hear the water shut off.

"El." She was careful not to say *Jane* still. Figured the girl wasn't ready for that. "El, are you doing alright? There's some clothing of Jim's to keep you warm for the night on the sink."

"Fine." There was an unmistakable sniffle. Lucy waited to give her privacy until El emerged, rubbing a towel over her head. Pale and pink with no speck of dirt on her. Drowning in flannel. "Can I feel your forehead?"

El rubbed her arms and shuffled closer so Lucy could check her.

“Warm. I’ll find the thermometer and see what medicine we have. Your legs and feet are covered in cuts, let me find you some wool socks too. Check you over cause this is something I have some experience with. Sit.”

El didn’t seem to like it but obeyed. Too fatigued to do much else.

“Just going to check for sores or any infection.” Lucy continued, shifting El’s too thin ankles about. “With my condition, I’m conscious of...” She trailed off and El looked around. Taking in the space.

“Condition?”

Lucy lifted her head.

“I have a sickness in me.”

“Sickness?”

El was talking to her. Relaxed. Lucy engaged it hoping to make her comfortable.

“It’s called diabetes. I was a little younger than you when I got it,” Lucy cleaned El’s cuts. The girl seemed used to being handled cause she didn’t flinch from the sting. Ointment followed. “It means there’s an organ in me that...”

Lucy thought of how her mother explained it so many years ago.

“...an organ in my body that’s just tired. It’s confused and it doesn’t quite know what to do,” she sighed. Had she become her mother? Worried to death and sheltering a sick little girl to a fault. “So, I have to support it myself with certain foods and medications. A shot. Encourage it to do its job.”

“One shot and you’re all better?” El asked with that same brand of innocence Lucy had once. Had. The word still panged.

“Ah, daily shots. Two. Forever. Until science catches up.” Lips pressed. She felt El looking at the scar on her cheek.

“Hurts?”

“No, the needle is so thin now, I barely feel it.”

“Papa made you sick?”

“It was before I met him. He tried to make me sicker, you know, to control me. Do you understand that?”

El nodded, allowing Lucy to work big socks up her legs.

“He put sickness in me.” Came the only sentiment the little girl could form. Lucy wanted to hold her. To let her know she wasn’t alone but her joints turned to hard pieces of diamond.

“He did it to all of us, I think.”

“Yes.”

“Ah...try to keep your feet covered even around the house.” Lucy met the younger girl’s eyes and seemed to struggle. Standing to go. “Let’s get something warm in your stomach.” El followed behind her, keeping a distance until she saw Amanda on the counter sizing her up. El snatched Lucy’s wrist and waited for the cat to hiss but she simply smelled the air and came to sweep across her little legs.

“She’s friendly,” Jim grumbled in a huff after fighting with the unused pullout. Damn cat watched in judgement. “Mostly.”

Cautious, El reached to pet the cat. Felt the puffs of fur.

"She looks like snow."

“Her name’s Amanda.” Lucy continued to the kitchen area when El’s head shot up. As if she remembered something but peered at Hopper and decided not to say. “Jim, she still has a fever and needs rest. Let’s see if she can keep her food down and go from there.”

“I have some supplies locked up.” Jim hurried to get them as Lucy got El seated at the counter. She put a pot on the stove and figured a can of chicken soup would suffice. Jim returned with a tiny stick. “Gonna check your temperature. This goes under the tongue. Ah.”

El looked at him like he had two heads but let him pop the thermometer in. He stared at her. Remembered staying up all hours when Sara had the slightest fever.

“Hold it there for a moment.” He and Lucy danced awkwardly around this, they went to a Christmas party and adopted a child on the way home.

“Hundred and one point six.” Jim frowned. “Probably could use a good sickness, get all that lab shi...*stuff* out of you.” He joked and El just blinked at him. Lucy turned with a bowl and spoon, sliding it over.

“It’s hot.”

El picked up her spoon and eyed them staring at her. Both adults seemed to realize it and shifted to go about setting the beds up. Jim went into the bedroom as Lucy paused. El wasn’t eating ravenously as expected. That worried her. She seemed sluggish. Sullen. Lucy pushed her sleeves up to do the dishes in the sink and El stopped mid-sip.

“Are you alright?” Lucy caught El’s eyes on her arms. On the scars crossing like shattered porcelain that had been glued back together. A child trying to salvage their beloved doll.

“Done.” El pushed up, offering her bowl to be polite. She stood there and watched Lucy wash it clean. “Did you fall?”

“Hm?” Lucy turned her head when El pushed the sleeve higher. Studying her as if she was looking at ancient artifacts in a museum. Huge eyes taking them in. Exposing, but not with judgement.

“Papa had these friends. When they didn’t do what he asked, they never came back. He said they climbed to heaven...”

Yes, Lucy dragged a good handful of them there on Brenner’s orders.

“...and you look like you tried to climb to heaven except you fell and broke.” El watched Lucy bring her wounded hand closer to her ribs.

"I suppose you're right," she replied. El's little fingers slipping from her. Jim popped his head out.

"Have something she can take for now. Sorry, kid, I wish it tasted better. I'll get you some water to wash it down." Hopper handed a little cup of thick liquid that El grimaced at before she sipped from a new glass he offered next. Stomaching it because she was used to that much.

"Bedtime?" He was clearly beat. They went into the bedroom so Lucy could grab her nightie. El climbed into the middle of the big bed. Sank easily as Jim covered her.

"Put extra locks on the doors. Windows are sealed too. We're just out there if you need anything, so try to sleep this off, kid. Okay?" He sat down. Tried not to engage too much because it made something dull in his chest ache. Sara would have begged him for a bedtime story and won the battle.

Lucy smelt the way his soul simmered and longed. Didn't say anything while she washed her face clean and exited the bathroom in her gown and robe. El nodded mutely and they left her to sleep. Both crashing into the pullout mattress.

"Still have to meet Owens tomorrow," Lucy sighed and burrowed close, "I could cancel."

"No, it'll look weird. I'll set up the trailer and you can take the Blazer," Jim faced her at the same time Lucy turned. Eyes still meeting in the dark. She shifted up on his outstretched arm. Kissed him with all her might. One moment of calm. The cat jumped on to settle near Jim's legs and he groaned.

"Thanks for the dance, Jim Hopper," Lucy tucked further into him, contented. He seemed to be fighting sleep, stilling as Lucy inhaled deeper. Obviously reading him. "She'll be okay in there. I'll stop by the store. Grab some clothing that'll work a little better. Maybe check the pharmacy if she isn't well in the morning."

He only nodded, blowing air out his nose and closing his eyes. Lucy felt this weight in her stomach burning. Hot coals changing colors

under pressure and heat. Slowly, she slipped away and made a wish for Jim to follow her.

** ** *

“Lucy,” Sam Owens has a stress ball gripped tightly in his hand when he came to retrieve her from the waiting room, “forgive me, I’m not usually late.”

“You’re busy. I assume.” She stood to follow him. Simple dress in a deep purple. Tights. Boots with heels she knew he’d peered at to frown down. One hand clutched her tiny purse strap close. Sam had his white coat on over a layered sweater and collared shirt. Almost casual. Almost official.

“This might seem an unconventional check-up, I figured a simple space would do. They think I’m a visiting specialist.”

“So many masks and only one stress ball.” She dropped her eyes to see him pocket it.

“I’ll get you your own with your name when your hand is ready for it.” He joked, opening a door to a cozy space. She wasn’t sure if he meant to be more shrink or more doctor today. “Have a seat on the couch.”

She removed her coat as he gestured to take it. Leaving her purse with it. A sheet of plastic rustled under her bottom. She tried not to think about El’s worse fever or Jim’s frazzled silence at home. He must be powering away with tools to seal that trailer up. Lucy remembered her parents accident-proofing their house. Locking the treehouse up.

“I couldn’t help but notice you drove Jim’s truck in. Alone.” Sam adjusted his stethoscope and went to a tray of sterile instruments. Pulled gloves on. The snap brought her back.

“I told him I wanted to go alone, haven’t driven since...” She trailed off. Heard Connie’s body crashing between metal, brick, and glass. Bones exploding like shrapnel. Mia’s lifeless body cold next to her. “Since that night.”

“And how was it?”

“Cool. Calm.” She peered away. “Full control of the radio. Jim's taste is questionable.”

“Ah, always a plus.” Sam turned and nudged a stool up to her. “You mind if I touch you?”

“No.” She allowed him to tilt her head. Rubber wafted. He caught a few healing scars. Checked her breathing. Felt for further damage or sickness. Made sure there weren't any sores or numbness in her legs or feet.

“The nurse recorded your blood pressure was in a better spot. You gained two pounds. That's good. Very good.” He seemed distracted. “Eating better?”

“I think so. Jim's actually a good cook.”

“Medication and shots.”

“Clockwork.” Lucy met his eyes when they lifted before he removed his gloves to write on a clipboard. “Where does that go? My paperwork.”

“My eyes only,” Sam assured her. “Any headaches?”

“Sometimes in the morning.”

“Fatigue?”

“Here and there.”

“Vomiting, dry mouth?”

“None.”

“Fasting today?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Sam got up. “Let's draw your blood and I have something you can nibble on while we talk. I'll check your hand over

afterward.” He put on a fresh pair of gloves and came to her. Expertly wrapped her arm. Pricked and filled three vials. Lucy was used to her blood being in vials. Lined up neatly to be separated out and filed.

Sam removed his glove again and plucked up a box on the table.

“You eat many donuts, Lucy?”

“On occasion. I only get one.” She smelt the sugar. Saccharine to match Sam’s smile there.

“Let me guess. Pink with colorful sprinkles type of girl?”

“You guess right.” She took one from the colorful box of choices with a napkin. Scooted back to take a bite. Humming blissfully.

“I’m quite weak for a maple bar.” He grabbed his own. Set the clipboard aside and leaned into his desk. “We deserve to indulge, I imagine it’s hard for you.”

“Martin didn’t like it unless he allowed it.” She remarked, licking her thumb. Sam didn’t watch her or her sticky fingers. Brenner would have.

“That’s interesting,” Owens shrugged.

“He likes control.”

“Yes, but your first reaction was to comment on what Martin would have allowed and not your needs. Mind, body, or disease.”

Lucy slowed, wiping her fingers before she twisted the flimsy paper around.

“I guess.”

“Do you go about your day like that?” Sam clasped his own hands after finishing. “Living still by Brenner’s code and his rules before your own.”

“I was seventeen when I met Martin Brenner, he didn’t like it when I pissed out of turn.” Lucy crossed her legs. Sam hitched this almost

smile at her frankness. The woman was charming. Nodding, he slipped into an adjacent chair. Rust squeaking as it turned. "There I go again, calling him Martin."

"Does that feel too personal to you?"

"Jim said he didn't like it and I didn't realize really until last night," Lucy gestured aimlessly. Stopped to massage her wounded hand when it tingled. "It's a habit. Same way I rarely call Jim 'Hop' or 'Hopper' like the rest of the town. He's just Jim to me." Something about that made her crack a distant smile, eyes elsewhere.

"I think Jim's struggling to understand your relationship."

"He doesn't want to believe I came to Martin of my own choice." She sighed, shoulders dropping. "It's easier for him to think it was all forced."

"Would you say Martin manipulated it?"

"Yes, but I had my moments where my need for him blurred my own guilt and fear. Even if he set up all the pieces. He predicted my emotions and played them."

"Sort of like what you can do. This ability you have." Sam set both his arms on the rests. Relaxing. "Lucy, if you didn't bond with Martin Brenner, do you think you'd be alive today?"

That gouged her.

"You have an immense survival instinct, your hand is proof of that. You've been playing survivor ever since you were diagnosed, I bet." Owens continued easily.

"He didn't allow many people to call him by his first name. Only those special girls."

"You're saying he slept with other women in your position."

"Just one other that I know of. She's not around anymore." Lucy averted her eyes. "It'll take time. Detaching."

"Refocusing to what's best for you. What you want." Sam agreed. "You're well on your way. Really, Lucy, you're doing everything you can and it's paying off. Keep it up. Don't close off to friends. I realize there are parts of you that you need to hide, but you have a whole life ahead of you."

Lucy silently agreed. Felt strange. Knowing she could feel the sun on her face again without shame.

"There is a subject you haven't touched since that night, you know?"

"Mia." Lucy tasted rust along her tongue, arms pulling tighter. "I can talk about it. I think about her..." *So much*. She closed her eyes. Recalled laughter. An old tire swing. Mia pushing her so high, she thought she was flying there in tumbling autumn leaves.

Sam pushed the tissue box into Lucy's hands. Let her take one to snuffle.

"She's just in everything." The syllables came out thick and piled together. "I've done things..." Teeth gnashed. Hot tears poured slow and steady. Dripping upon her clothes. "I've done some things in my life that I can't take back. Evil things I might even be able to forgive myself for. But, Mia. I can't forgive that."

"Brenner did that."

"I handed her to him. My stupid choice that cost...everything. I can't believe I walked out of Martin Brenner's office thinking maybe it was the start of something good."

"You didn't kill your sister, Lucy." Sam offered the words like breath to her lungs. As if he was spinning pure air into gold. Lips pressed at him.

"But, I wasn't there. The one moment she needed me most and I wasn't there. The gas went into my sister's lungs and she was alone. I know exactly what she smelled like too. That fear, it just..." She clipped off there. Closed her eyes again and saw Mia there all rot. Mouth opening until her jaw unhinged to let a poisonous gas billow

while her eyes became two ghastly headlights. Washing her features away.

“You were there many times before that. Even in spirit. I read about your sister. Doctor Garland saved a lot of lives under that roof. And I heard whispers of her side activities as well. These subjects marked *missing*. Technically. We know better. Souls that got out and that will never be found because they’re somewhere else enjoying the sun. That’s your sister. That’s Mia.”

Lucy gave this tremored, silent breath. Tried to be steadier.

“One day, you’re going to enjoy that same sun without guilt,” he said. Lip wobbling, Lucy felt a wave crash and overcome her. It made her stop crying. Another tissue was plucked to dry her eyes.

Sam gave her another moment to collect herself then moved again for a third pair of gloves.

“How about I look at your hand? See how it’s healing. Let you go home to Jim. Enjoy the drive and take the long way if you can.” He beamed. “Get some needed rest.”

A smile followed.

** ** *

Lucy unlocked the door, balancing bags and a file with one arm. A huff followed when the chain caught it from opening wider.

“Jim, little help,” she called out, “please and thank you?” Stepped hurried up before the door shut and reopened.

“Sorry about that,” he took the bags to ease her and turned to shout, “kid, come on out...! She knows to hide when someone approaches. Setting up some traps tonight, didn’t want to surprise you coming in.”

“Appreciated, how is she...?” Lucy trailed off when she saw the little girl in Jim’s sweater. Puffy and clearly unwell. “She looks worse.” A sigh followed and El jolted back again as Lucy came to her. “Jim, we’re not equipped if she goes higher. Come with me, you’re

going back to bed.”

Lucy offered her stronger hand. Let El close the distance and take it. Still trying to be stone in the face.

“I got you some clothing from the second-hand store. Better things to wear day and night. Still probably a little big, it would look strange if I started buy handfuls of little girl’s clothing all the sudden.” She ushered El into the bedroom, helped her under the covers.

“Papa said I would die if I went outside,” El’s dark eyes fluttered.

“You’re not going to die.” The tone got assertive at that. Lucy tucked her in with a hard expression.

“He said I would be switched off if I didn’t work.” El paused to see Lucy’s face again. “He said you switched people off for him if they didn’t work.”

“I’m not going to-”

“But, if he asked you to, you would have. You would have done it.” El pushed up. Trembling and heated. “Why did he get to decide who gets switched off and who didn’t?”

“He wanted us to be perfect for him. He’s evil is why. El, please just lie down-”

“Was there anyone deciding he should be switched off? Why did he get t-?”

“El, calm down,” Lucy pressed her back into bed. A force shoved her backward. Almost had her tumbling. Blood dripped from El’s stuffed and red nose. “That’s enough!”

“Hey, both of you, drop it.” Jim pushed into the room, but El wasn’t finished.

“But, did anyone say he should be switched off? When was he going to switch you off? Is that why you broke? Did he throw you out like one of his dolls and you just cracked everywhere? Why did he

get to pick? I don't understand, I don't understand," El squeaked this cry before she covered her eyes with her hands. Finally able to articulate too many things she locked away. Why this all happened to begin with. "Why do it?"

"Jane, I-" Lucy choked and caught herself. El's huge eyes lifted.

"Jane? Who is Jane?"

"Lucy, go to the other room." Jim's order came out harsher than he meant. Stress building. "I'll take care of this, just go."

She almost burst. She promised Terry.

Spinning on her heel, Lucy snatched up a coat and went outside instead. Into the snow and down the creaking steps. The lake sat there, half-frozen. Glassy and crackling peacefully. Wind casting softer ripples. The sight made her shoulders drop. She came to the waters and saw her reflection there, curving slightly to see it closer.

Two eyes like headlights opened wide at the vision behind her. Brenner poised over her shoulder with a grin that tore his face in half. A cry rocked her chest and she scrambled back into the snow. Caught herself on the stronger hand. A chill shot up her skin.

"Lucy!" Jim came to the steps. Hurrying down to help pick her up.

"I saw him!" She pawed into Jim's arms. Turning back to see nothing there in the black waters. A chilled breath puffed out.

"There's nothing there, Lucy." He peered at the trailer. "We can't bombard this kid with information either."

"It's the truth about herself. About the life she missed out on, how can we keep that from her any longer?" Lucy faced Jim. Still clutching at his shirt. Two strong hands held her elbows steady.

"Just give it time, she's not well." Jim paused. "You're not well either. Let yourself keep slowing down and healing."

She only frowned at him.

“I’ve seen this before, you gotta trust me.”

“I’ve trusted you all my life, Jim, I never stopped. But, I just...I promised Terry. And El’s not getting better. What if she gets worse? We can let her just...get worse under our care.”

“We can’t take her to a hospital. Just let me handle this, Lucy, I got it.”

“You’re pushing me out again.” She hissed as he pulled her to come back inside. Jim gave this heated look but didn’t reply to that much. Only because he couldn’t.

“Just come inside,” he whispered instead. “Get some rest off your feet. I’ll get some food going.”

Lucy was planted on the couch, remote dropped into her lap. Jim still kissed her head gently and left to check on El. Tucked the little girl in before he returned to the main room. The three fell into this routine. Jim keeping El and Lucy at opposite ends of the house. Always in the room when they crossed paths.

El got worse. Feverish and muttering despite hot soup and medications they had. No surprise when Jim had to leave for the station for a few hours. Lucy kissed him as many times as she could, knowing what she would do. Waved to him at the porch knowing her betrayal was coming.

And then she made a phone call.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you, thank you, thank you for the support and I still have a bit to go for these two. Sorry for the wait and I know leaving tumblr unexpectedly probably chased many of you off. I'm still here and still writing and I still love my characters to the core.

Please chat with me below if you have time and I hope these two still have a place in people's hearts. Would love to chat if friends are still out there. Have a wonderful day xx :)

29. And so We Will All Be Together

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey all! If you're still with me!! So so sorry to let my stories slow the way I did. I ended SOMY as needed and it's time for LFTM to get a little wrap up too. Lucy and Jim have been a fantastic couple. I never thought I could write a story like this and I'm so proud of it. If you followed it, seriously thank you!!! This fandom has slowed up so much but you guys are still amazing and please leave words below if you have time!! Enjoy the ending and ofc like SOMY, if I get the drive for the last arc I'd planned, it's still open to write. Jim and Lucy deserved the softest ending and I hope I delivered that. :)

“You look like hell, Chief,” Callahan’s usual line warranted a glare. “Lucy wearing you out?”

Jim forced a smile, signing whatever document Flo was pushing in front of him before she plucked his lit cigarette out.

“Jealousy will get you nowhere, Phil,” he puffed, turning to his busy secretary. “That all? I need to jet.”

“Yeah, yeah. We got this, go.” Flo shooed him off. Jim waited until he cleared the station to light up again. Chilly day seemed to look up. His favorite song was playing on the radio. Should have been a good sign. The truck sped across a long stretch of road toward the trailer.

One hand smacked the radio off when he saw the car there.

Jim cursed the world to pieces. Skidded to park and raced out. Into the house with heavy steps where Lucy met him in the living room. Amanda hopped up behind her. Obviously taking a side.

“What’d you do?” He accused and Lucy clasped her hands. Not sorry. Blinking.

“We need help. I got it for us.”

“I had it handled.” Jim shoved past her, yanking his gun out to point it at Sam Owens sitting on his bed next to El. Doctor bag open. The little girl cracked her eyes to see him. No color on her face. Owens signed, peering down the barrel.

“Jim, do you honestly believe I’m more afraid of that gun than your girlfriend?” He eyed Lucy slipping into the room behind him.

“What are you doing?”

“Sam is helping us,” Lucy recited. “Aren’t you, Sam?”

“Hop, I prefer to live. Lucy already laid out what would happen to me in acute detail and anyone else if this girl gets harmed or taken. I can help and I’m going to. Frankly, you’re an idiot for not getting me sooner.” Owens set a couple pill bottles on the dresser. “My people aren’t Brenner’s.”

“Lucy and El aren’t setting foot near that place. El was still being looked for.”

“Those people were quietly misplaced. El is a traumatized girl in need of a mother and father. Know anyone?” Sam’s brow lifted and Jim hardened, the gun lowered. “You’re going to make up a story, Jim. Let’s say one of your old New York buddies had an accident and left his daughter in the hands of the godfather. Spin a sad story. My people will forge a few papers. You and Lucy get hitched.”

“Whoa,” Jim began to sweat, “easy.”

“Getting to into it, aren’t I?” Owens chuckled, shining a flashlight into El’s throat. “I’ll help you, you gotta let me.”

“Not like we have a choice,” Jim peered at Lucy. Blazing so she matched it.

“I agree. We didn’t have a choice.” Her teeth pressed. “We couldn’t draw it out. She was dying. My mother would do the same. Put El in Jim’s name. Smoking aside, his lifespan is going to surpass mine easily. We all see the studies on diabetics.”

Jim made a sound at that revelation. Breathless because he knew it was true. Somehow outliving Lucy felt like the worst thing he could do in this life. He already outlived Sara.

“Until that time, we’ll have each other,” she seemed to sense his ache. Smell it like rain on the wind. As she always did. “That’s all we’ll need.”

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El got strong again. Sam delivered and then some. The official paperwork was the most important. Jim took up chewing toothpicks and plastic straws to get over the smoking. Tried to remember what he was like as a family man. Didn't shave though.

“We don’t have to rush and marry,” Lucy piped up over a fresh mug of coffee, “I’d rather live in sin on my terms than do anything that lab orders ever again. Don’t you dare ask me.”

“The new house is a good idea,” Jim looked up from the box he was packing as she poured him a steaming mug. “Can’t fit in this shack anymore.”

“With a treehouse in back,” Lucy mused, “we can build one together.”

“And a piano in the living room. Maybe a porch swing,” he softened at her smile. Forgiving her in slow minutes that seemed to tick without mercy. El came out of the bedroom in one of Jim’s shirts, rubbing sleep from her eyes. “That’s my cue to start breakfast. Omelettes?”

“Sounds good,” Lucy sipped and went around the counter. Petting Amanda as she followed Jim over. “You’re looking so much better, may I?”

El tipped her head so Lucy could feel with her knuckles.

“Broken fever...” She beamed. “How about you put on something warmer and we go out back for a moment? To talk.” The little girl peered between her and Jim before she went back into the bedroom.

“Talk?”

“She deserves a couple of answers,” Lucy grabbed her coat, “after everything.” One gesture and El followed her outside. “I know it says Jane on your papers but...if you prefer we call you El, that’s up to you? I know your friends gave you the name.”

“Jane is okay, but I like El,” her voice tapered off and the door shut. “Mike.”

“Let’s get the move going. Make sure you stay safe. Stay healthy. You’ll see your friends again, I’m sure they miss you as much as you miss them.” Lucy sat on the steps to watch the water. El hesitated but joined her in a puffy coat that went to her knees. Wind swept through them.

“Your hair is pretty,” El engaged her.

“Nice to grow it out,” Lucy crossed her arms over her knees and El mirrored it.

“I want a different story,” she tried to find the correct sentiment but Lucy understood.

“This is the story you have. And there are plenty of pages left. They kept things from you and that’s not fair. Nothing that happened to you was fair and it wasn’t your fault. Papa was bad. Not you.”

“Was my mom bad?”

“No. Terry was the bravest woman I ever met. Brave like my sister. They fought Papa at every turn,” Lucy looked at the girl there watching intent with huge eyes. “They got me fighting too. It’s important to me that you know your mother loved you. And that she’d give anything to be with you. And that she fought hard. There are things the lab is keeping under wraps to protect us. Things we’ll explain when you’re older but I wanted you to know that.”

“And Jim’s my dad now?”

“On paper. He’s gonna take care of you and so am I. We’ll get a house and you can decorate your room however you want.”

“Are you my mom now?”

“I’m not looking to replace your mother. No one should. She was a good and brave mother. I’ve never been a big sister but I can try for you. If you’ll have me. We’ll work from there.” Lucy’s lips pressed and El seemed encouraged. “Deal?”

Her hand went out. El thought for a beat before she took it. Understood the gesture.

“Deal,” she nodded. “Big sister.”

“There’s a lot we need to figure, but together I think it’ll turn out. And Sam, he’s gonna help us get through it too.”

“Not a bad man?”

“No, but it’s important to know that if something ever makes you scared or uncomfortable as you go about the world. You can tell us and we’ll stop it. We’ll help you as best we can. That’s our job now.”

“Can we sit for a while right here?” El asked after another few seconds.

“Yes, we absolutely can,” Lucy exhaled toward the grey sky. Snow long melted. El sat there with her in silence. Enjoyed the freshness of a new day budding like spring flowers. Lucy closed her eyes to inhale deep. Let it out. El peered at her before straightening up to do the exact same.

“We’re free,” El decided. Both girls shared a smile.

“Yes, we are,” Lucy recalled something. “There’s also one more thing. Your papers. We wondered if you wanted to pick a middle name. Just a name you like between your first and last. It can be anything you want.”

El didn’t think long before she said:

“Mia. If that’s okay.”

Lucy appeared truly touched.

“I think Mia is perfect. Jane Mia Hopper.”

And so they got the house. With the porch swing in front. A treehouse in back. Plenty of space for Amanda to roam inside. February came and they decided the next phase. A dinner. Gathered the party at Mike’s house before Jim’s truck revved up one afternoon when the sun was barely peeking out.

“Ready, kid?” Jim watched El smooth her spiky hair down that had really started to grow out.

“Yes...” They got out. Jim felt for Lucy’s hand upon coming around as the front door opened. Mike stumbled out, flocked by his friends. El found his eyes immediately. Tears bloomed. And then they ran at each other across the way. Launched into a hug with the rest of the boys following. Nancy waved at the porch, arms crossed as the kids all tumbled over in a heap. Laughter followed.

“Lucy!” Karen perked in the doorway. “Come on in, I have wine!”

“Don’t need to tell me twice,” Lucy kissed Jim and followed the path into the house. Left the kids to catch up.

“So sorry to hear about Hop’s buddy in the city,” Karen looped their arms together. “What a darling girl, but...the buzzcut?”

“Ah, some kind of gum incident I think, it’s growing quick,” Lucy smiled as Karen poured them too huge glasses. “Let me help with dinner. Smells amazing.” Commotion sounded as the kids came in and migrated toward the basement with Nancy’s beckoning.

“We’re waiting on one more kid, new girl from school the boys have been hanging out with. Thought it might help, new girlfriend and all.”

A car revved outside. The glitter of a Blue Camaro pulling up before a little redhead exited, skateboard in hand to ride up.

“Mike! Your other friend is coming!” Karen called. Dustin and Lucas wrestled over who got the door. “Beer in the fridge, Jim.” He appeared in the doorway.

"Maybe just one," he searched and left the girls alone to chatter.

"How's everything? You're working again."

"Short hours as we adjust to the new place and all but I can't complain," Lucy sipped and the redhead appeared in the doorway.

"Mrs. Wheeler, Lucy. This is Max, she's cool. From California," Dustin blurted in one go with Lucas rolling his eyes.

"Hi..." Max flashed her teeth quick. "Thanks for the invite to dinner."

"Great to meet you, Max, you can call me Karen."

Max nodded once and got pulled to go downstairs for the game.

"So cute," Karen gushed, peering into the oven. Lucy took a drink after offering the potholders next to her so the dish could be checked. "Almost. So, I was thinking. More wine night. You, me, and Joyce. Soon. If she isn't busy with her new man. I'll tell you, they are so cute together. That Bob is just head over heels for her."

"He's darling," Lucy agreed. "I have a checkup coming and Jane to watch between my shifts. We'll work something out." She caught Jim passing again and beamed. "Things have been chaotic..."

"Of course!" Karen dressed up a chicken on a plate with sides.

"...but I don't know," Lucy finished, "I'm really happy."

** ** *

"Pink frosting. As always." March came and there was something off about Sam. Something rustic in the air. Vaguely saltwater. Lucy narrowed on him the moment her checkup began. "Can we take a drive somewhere, Lucy?"

"Depends, Sam." She chewed, thumbing rosy frosting from her lip. "Where?"

"You know where. I know you don't wish to go in but there's

something I want you alone to see. And I want you alone to decide what we do about it," he looked grave. Waited for Lucy to refuse. But she inhaled peppermint. Signed.

"As long as I'm not late. We're watching a movie as a family this afternoon," Lucy stood and gathered her purse. Stole another half-donut for herself without asking and munched on the way to Sam's car. Sam listened to the same goofy country music Jim liked which put Lucy at ease. Some ease. Her nerves twitched as they pulled up to the building. Walked the familiar halls that felt like a tomb. Harrowing and buzzing. Scientists all over like little flies.

Sam came to a door. Turned to Lucy there waiting.

"Something we found," he said, "after."

A slot pushed back. Lucy crept slowly to peer into a white room. Thought she saw snow falling before a body on the bed turned to her. Arms wrestled into a straitjacket. Hair an unkempt, white nest. But, those wild eyes saw her and flashed.

"Lucy..." Martin Brenner sang. "Lucy. My darling. My angel. You're here. I knew you'd come for me."

"We found him...near an opening before it closed on us. Half-gone," Sam explained while Lucy stared on. Expression not even twitching as Brenner got closer.

"We can leave together. I always knew you'd come back for me. I prayed to you every night. Please. Please..." His wide eyes filled with tears. "Acqua Di Parma's *Colonia*. I wore it for you every day. Please let me feel you. Just touch my face. Our souls are bound. I love you, Zero. I love you, Lucretia. I always will. We belong together. Forever. And ever."

Lucy reached out. Saw him bracing with manic shudders. Took some pity on her old monster.

And then she instead closed the slot.

"Lucy!" He rasped. Sounding truly horrific. Growling. Kicking the door. "Don't you walk away from me! That place, it's us! I will

always be with you, Lucy Garland! Always!"

"Let him rot. Be as kind as you can while he does and when he does die...I plan the funeral alone. I'll prep the body. I'll do everything. My way," Lucy turned so Sam followed, unable to mask his awe. "And Sam?"

"Yes?"

"Don't tell Jim," she went around the corner. Ready to leave this place and never see it again. She and Jim loved each other. And they would always have their demons. Their secrets. That was fine. Life was always a twisting path. Lucy Garland knew she'd never see Martin Brenner's eyes again. He couldn't touch her now.

She drove home after Sam dropped her back off. Climbed the steps and saw her family already on the couch. Jim telling an animated story.

"I want to make the popcorn!" El lunged up. Bouncing. "I won't burn it this time!"

"Please be careful," Jim called after her. Lucy fell into the couch, tucked herself under Jim's arm. Inhaled the smell of his soap. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, I'm just glad to be home with you guys," she lifted her eyes and kissed him. Lingered to deepen it. Smiled when his facial hair tickled. "Love you." Her mutter had him brightening. They curled up together on the couch. Buttery popcorn filling the air as El laughed at the cat in the kitchen. A stark cinnamon scent overcame it all.

"I love you too," Jim's palm ran the length of her back. Lips touched her crown before she peered up again.

Sometimes the nearest thing to heaven was your feet on the floor in a place you felt safest. Pink strawberry cake on your birthday. Wearing whatever you wished. A house painted in all your favorite colors. An old cat roaming every room. A little girl's loud laughter. Lucy and Jim making eyes to smile. Nestled together sharing kisses with scars that were still knitting as the sun began to fall for needed

rest. Sometimes the nearest thing to heaven was Lucy Garland grinning before she said:

“Will you marry me, Jim Hopper?”

And Chief Jim Hopper’s matching smile before he replied.

“I thought you’d never ask me, Luce.”

~~~~~

*Because a photograph is  
Like an hourglass out of time  
And then I never laughed  
Because I never had no time  
Oh, oh, oh, I'm  
Looking for the magic in my eyes*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I did it!!! I know I maybe didn't get to write as full a story as I wished for my last ST fics but I'm still so proud of them and I ended them on my terms. It was truly best for my characters. Thanks again for following this fic and I hope it did some good for my lovely readers! Feel free to stay and chat with me! Have a fantastic week~~~ XOXO